

“I Believe I Can  
Better Myself”

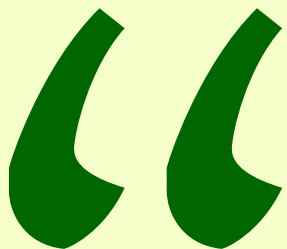
Dorothea Lange  
Southern Photographs

Walter Rhett



**For Damali**





# **No Flower Bed of Ease”**

Essay on Dorothea Lange's Southern Photographs

**Walter Rhett**

the photographs provide a unique, long witness across several states

during difficult economic times by a single onlooker who is observing the world and its people and conditions with a powerful, constant eye.



# “No Flower Bed of Ease”

## Essay on Dorothea Lange's Southern Photographs

Walter Rhett

I was rummaging in the cloistered basement stacks of a local college library when I first came across Dorothea Lange's photographs. I had been working as an independent historian and tour guide, acting in the role of an African griot, and was using free time to peruse books and articles to see what might open up. I turned the heavy glossy pages, bowing each one gently with my thumb, my eyes suddenly lingering over portraits from the 1930s, a family album of Southern sharecroppers, tenant farmers, American migrants, adults and children, black and white. Many viewing Southern history “come to see the elephant,” to satisfy beliefs that prevail too much or too little against the facts. Southern history to many is a calculated carnival of horrors.

So, the honesty of the photographs was startling. I didn't know the photographer, but I knew the message. The photographs told how to live in the midst of arrested decay, under the elephant's foot. Living goes on and can not be abandoned, despite hardships and changing times. The photographs were candid, reverential and unsentimental, guileless. There were fire and doom in their moments. I immediately believed her work.

That first discovery of Dorothea Lange's photographs rewarded a faith in freelance knowledge. My private moment of adventure stumbled on a prize so stunning it lay beyond the grasp of immediate understanding.

Private voyages often lead to unintended places. To know them deeply, they must be revisited, Mississippi writer Eudora Welty noted, with "grave persistence."

In time, I came to realize Dorothea Lange's Southern photographs deserve wider purview. They tell several stories, including the story of another curious, freelancing adventurer—Dorothea Lange. During a 1960-61 interview with Suzanne Reiss, she said of her lifelong penchant for observing humanity in photographs, ("the openings I saw in an expanding world"), "it leads you to odd places but it's fun (217)."

On her Southern journey, she discovers in odd, silent moments a reverie of ideas and beliefs patterned in Southern life. Dorothea Lange refines these still visions of the state of things into an augury of survival. Her Southern photographs direct attention, as she put it, "to something unique from their own nature (218)." It is something hard to put your finger on.

## "It is brave to be Involved"

I saw discomfort and deep satisfaction in the images of her faces. Faces whose discomfort teetered between many sources. But faces which also reached their own destinations of living and found their own rewards of faith—an "authority of freedom" Lange called it—in the world around them. Freedom gained from finding your own way, a faith in the despair of living.

Dorothea Lange exhibited this authority. It's her way of seeing. She imbued it in her technique. It shines in her photographs. She learned it early.

She observed the life in the open windows of the tenements surrounding the open windows of the library staff offices where she waited for her mother after school. "I'm aware that I just looked at everything. I can remember the smell of the cooking too, the way they lived. Oh, I had good looks at that, but never set foot myself. Something like a photographic observer. I can see it. (11)."

Looking at her photographs, I began to realize her piercing curiosity; the desire to know, the eyes to see substance and

significance around them, an inherent facility to recognize and add intangibles to her pictures. Every photographer—and photograph—makes certain assumptions, but Dorothea Lange's work apprises us of her insights rather than her techniques.

Her Southern photographs surmise not what people have hung on to (emotionally or materially) but how much they have let go. The vale of misery placed on them redefines freedom and repositions it in unlikely places. These photographs, their backdrop the grueling misery of sharecropping during the Depression, exhibit freedom's hidden measure.

Time is strong in her pictures; it brings its remarkable powers to their images. In a paradox—photographers are often concerned about light, about illumination—Dorothea Lange places a premium on time, on waiting as she put it, until the photograph “arrived at the right place (55).” She knows the human body and face is its own page that portrays feelings and memories, experiences and ideas, private urges and dreams from within.

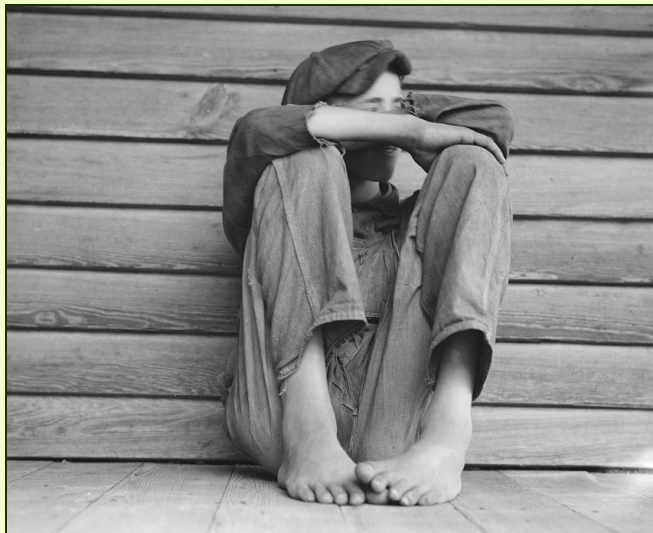
A main Lange technique waits as they emerge. From her experience, she observed, “No subject can hold on to anything that is false for them for too long (53).” Her photographs gather time

inside—and outside—the moment—to arrive at, “recordings of human beings you can look at and into (54).” The moments she captures in her photographs arrive as natural and easy as breathing.

### “To be not fearful is to be Unresolved”

Dorothea Lange's remarkable work of photographing the South's human terrain began with its own improbable journey. Living in San Francisco and married with two young children, operating her own studio, her 1935 photographic study of early migrants to California caught the attention of a Washington official in a New Deal program assisting relocating farm workers.

Roy Stryker, a Columbia University economics professor, came to Washington as chief of the History Section in the Information Division of the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farmers Security Administration (FSA). He founded and staffed the FSA photographic division, hiring Dorothea Lange



on the strength of her California photographs. “I didn’t know a mule from a tractor when I started,” she said.

Interviewed in 1963, Stryker recalled the division’s mission:

“I don’t know if anybody else will ever know how much [Rexford] Tugwell [Stryker’s boss] really conceived having to sell back to the people the thing he was doing. I think it was only primarily in supplying his field people with tools to make the program clear. Basically, his was an action program.”

If we strayed, he recounts, “circumstances pushed us in this direction.” Hiring photographers, Stryker asked, “How sharp was his mental vision as well as what he saw with his eyes? Those are the things you look for.” During his Smithsonian Archives of American Art interview, he explained:

“Photographers were intelligent people that worked for us. They were trying to tell us, tell the public, make pictures that were genuine, that recognized peculiar situations whether it be a piece of geography or a human being, and recognized the pertinent things in a situation . . . they were reporting what they felt and saw.”

Recording the earliest dust bowl arrivals and the camp conditions in California's agricultural valleys, Dorothea Lange was the first photographer to focus on the ecological conditions of the Great Depression and its effects on the human ecology—the “social erosion” of farm workers and farm life. Lange tells of first hearing the phrase: “we’ve been blown out.” “I went home that day a discoverer, a real social observer.”

With the FSA, she received a salary (rather than commissions and sales), a per diem (four, then five dollars a day!), and sometimes traveled with an assistant or was helped by state or federal officials in the field. Her assignments included broad themes: “cooking, sleeping, praying and socializing;” she exercised wide creative range.

Always among her best works were portraits. The people of the era; workers, friends, wives and mothers, husbands and fathers, children of different ages, across the different states.

She crisscrossed the South during the spring and summers of four years, from 1936 to 1939. Starting in Virginia, she worked her way through North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida; then Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas.

Journeying along thin ribbons of asphalt laid on top of old wagon paths and pre-European, Indian trails, she turned onto rutted dirt lanes, sending notice of her arrival in passages of dust and grit. Local people knew she was a stranger. Everyone could tell by the particular vortex of dust and car sounds. As the dust and mica settled, people gathered on weathered front porches to greet her. Dorothea Lange's arrival found waiting voices and welcomes standing in time.

In her 1964 Archives of American Art interview, she recalls the experiences: “When you were out in the field you were almost always alone, unknown, very often unprepared for, turned loose, really, with a background where something is expected of you. You found your way . . . We found our way in, slid in on the edges. We used our hunches, we lived, and it was hard, hard living.”

Waiting to see who she was (more important than what she wanted), women, not wanting to be forward, expressed their modesty by standing in the front door as she arrived.

She asked about them, their families, and asked if she could make photographs of them with their families. And people who knew without thinking the meaning of the odor of rain or how

sunlight refracted in the play of dust, agreed to share their image with a stranger, the one crossing the yard with a limp from a childhood bout of polio. Taking quiet pride in her official role and the politeness and importance of her request, surprised she just showed up to ask their help to show the government the conditions of the Depression by photographing their home and family, they agreed.

Dorothea Lange carried a heavy, bulky Graflex SLR camera with a hooded eyepiece. She let the children touch the camera and its lens. Before long, curiosity ceded to purpose.

## “Exhaust the little Moments”

The doorway marked the passage of what each day brought, but the porch in the South was the social space. Porches arranged function and order by season and need. Its zones and passages varied by family, age and imagination. The porch transformed limits into expectations, but also offered support, rest, a place of freedom and of spartan joy. Even when quiet and bare, a porch was the symbol and center of community. Porches flew abruptly

off into spaces invisibly filled with danger and dreams. Along her southern passage, Dorothea Lange photographed the abridged flights of many of the people she met against the democratic passages and dreams resting on their porches.

If the porch is a social and cultural space, openly arranging its meaning, the front door is an open space, transparent and fixed; without barriers, yet remote. (Closed, in the 1930s it told of rest, not safety). People think of a door as an entrance, but the Southern front door is an exit. It's a dare. A passage of faith; a garland for those going out; an open door is a close embrace—or maybe a snare of secluded fear. The South's widespread superstition said visitors who entered through the front door had to leave the same way to keep evil spirits from coming in.

Death, entering, had to go out a different way so it wouldn't return before its time. The front door was a portal between worlds, with grace and sin crowding in, trying to get by each other.

The vying enticements of doorways led to humor, as in the tale, “A Short Shelf Life:”

“Mary Jane worked harder than all the women in the fields and hard work seemed to improve her beauty. She fairly

glowed coming in from the fields. At night, a parade of hopeful suitors who wanted to bask in that light knocked lightly at her door, bearing gifts.

First came John. He brought fresh apples, peaches, grapes, strawberries, watermelons, honeydews, and pears. She'd tell him "leave them" on the porch. "I going to bed," she say.

Next Peter came with field peas, cucumbers, onions, corn, tomatoes, radishes, peppers, green beans, new potatoes, okra and squash. She tell him, "Put them on the porch; I tired!"

Then William knocked. "What you want?" she say. "Mary Jane, I got a mess of loving out here!" he say.

"Bring that t'ing on in," she say. "That t'ing perishable!"

A door was a place of decision.

A photograph was a powerful thing. During the old days, at the river, the faithful were taken by the arm, waded to waist-deep waters, and taking the mystic hand for "drowning comfort," they were baptized. A voice in the crowd might be heard to cry out, "that chile sure is getting a new soul!"

A photograph was a chance to freshen your soul, to let the world know you were winning against the devils. Dorothea Lange knew how to get beyond your weariness and struggles and fix your hope. Never blind to the invisible, she waited on the moment of your truth and got its image when it presented its gifts.

She often photographed Southern women standing or sitting near their front doors. She caught the indwelling as it drifted in; its returning provision renewed the triumphant self amid a cruel scroll of living. Unlike the Sisyphean exodus of tenant farmers from the dust bowls to an unsuspecting California, the Depression didn't change the lot of Southern sharecroppers and tenants, estimated at 1.83 million farm workers. In fact, during the Great Depression in the South, people returned to the farm!

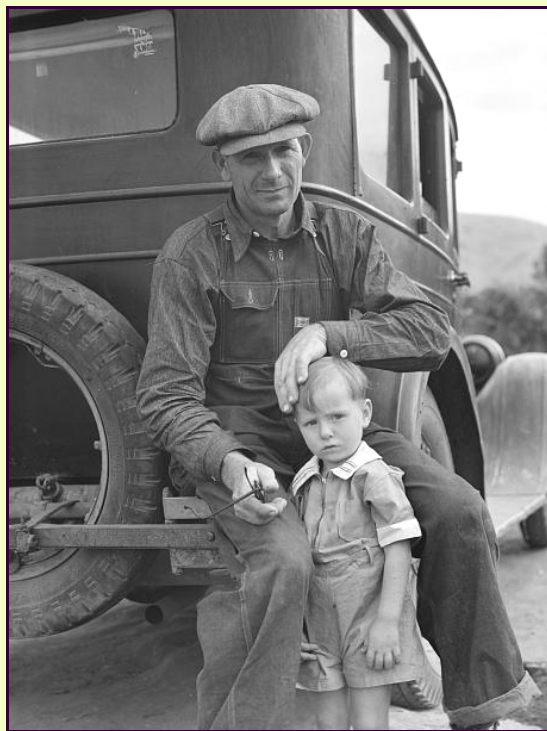
They supplemented the thin edge of income with fish caught from nearby streams, with game from the hunting woods; deer, squirrels, bobwhites, shrimp, brim, catfish prepared with nonperishable staples of grits or rice.

In Georgia at the time, the annual rural income averaged \$200 for whites (South Carolina averaged \$151), and it was substantially lower for blacks, less than a \$100 a year. By 1935, Georgia land

ownership for black farmers dropped below 12 percent. In April 1932, Mississippi foreclosed on one fourth of the state's farmland. A single North Carolina county saw 3,500 farms foreclosed. During this period, in Alabama, 207,000 farms were operated with sharecroppers and tenant laborers.

Their jobs, to prepare and work the fields, to harvest the crops, depended on the crop cycle. The South's croplands yielded peaches, oranges, sugar cane; beans, corn, 80 "truck crops;" peanuts, potatoes, wheat, turpentine; tobacco, rice, and cotton—as market prices dropped. The workers' meager wages depended on shares (a percentage of the harvest) and "furnish" credit (money advanced). The nation had 6.2 million farms. In the 1930s, by year's end, farm owners and workers typically lost ground.

When not put on shares, picking cotton was paid as piece work. In the 1930s it paid a cent and a half a pound. Recently I met a man who worked in the fields as a child picking cotton for two and a half cents a pound. I have childhood friends who picked for three cents a pound. I remember a rate of two cents a pound, with a fifty cents bonus for picking a hundred pounds. Legendary pickers could make five dollars a day.



The depression made “fair to middling” (cotton grades, assessed by buyers) difference to these families who spent daylight bent from the waist, crab walking cotton fields, feet splayed like new foals, pulling fiber from its seed bowls, stuffing sacks longer than elephants’ tusks. Gleaning fields where the air was too hot to breathe and the sun’s glare blinded sight and turned the skin on arms and necks raw to the touch. (Long, loose sleeves, bandanas, and wide hats helped keep painful heat off their skin.)

No difference, either, the privation and aching fatigue for the ones tying tobacco, stacking wheat, tapping trees, or cutting sugar cane—the families and people in Dorothea Lange’s images. Her caption notes report workers, for hoeing or “chopping” cotton in Alabama, made seventy-five cents for eleven to thirteen hour days.

Off the farms, William Cash, a native son, summed up Southern mill towns as “the squalid, the ugly, and the drab.” His 1929 *American Mercury* article asserted the Southerner appeared “totally blind to the realities of his condition (187),” living in a “closed, ordered world (189).”

So how did Dorothea Lange’s four years of photographs get past the fascination and fear of the elephant?

The principle of creating a photograph, Dorothea Lange felt, draws from a special encounter, a special fearlessness: “one of the sharp instants of realization of the moment. It’s like making all parts of the world your natural element, through experience and through no alternatives for you (26).” It brings life history and the historical moment into contact.

Every Southerner knows the difference between rising and falling tides and the powerful currents that move invisibly beneath the surface. Framing the Depression, Dorothea Lange images were the evidence of the hidden power that moves and sustains and enables the rise of those who have been stagnant, or crushed and fallen; she revealed their hardships and grace.

The spare, minimalist portraits Dorothea Lange sets on the stark geography of fertile fields have a pull beyond their obvious irony and harsh details. In the 1960 interview with Reiss, she explained her working theory of how/why photographs communicate: “A good deal of the attraction between people, I think, is based on the fact that one is able to absorb the creation. The whole point of remembering these people is to try to find out what it is that forms you (68). I really and seriously tried, with

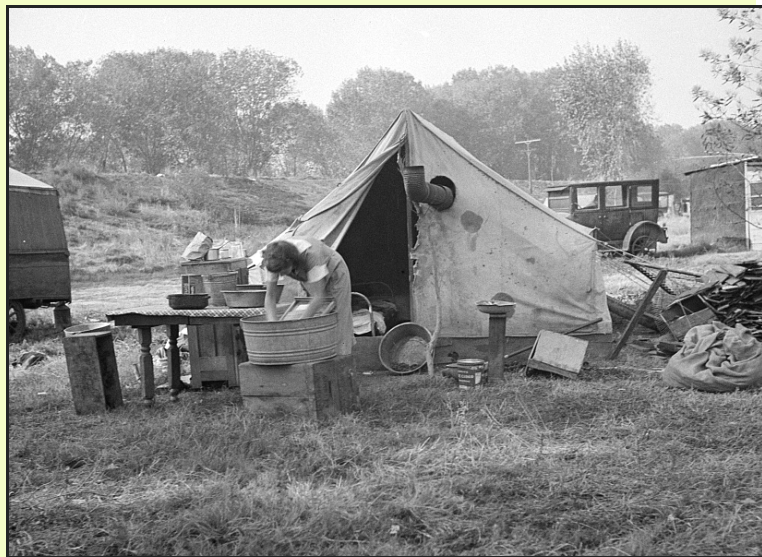
every person I photographed, to reveal them as closely as I could (92).”

### “Standing among new Affairs”

Lange's Graflex SLR Series D camera exposed 4 x 5 negatives and she lumbered it across the South. Big, boxy, rugged, it was a contraption—but it was also a good icebreaker for children, who were curious about its parts and operation. She always took time to let children touch the camera and lens, an unassuming openness that won over many families with its sincerity. The Graflex, a solidly made American camera, has had a long professional life and many admiring fans. Lange knew its operation thoroughly.

The main body of Dorothea Lange's four years of Southern works are the 1,179 photographs in the Library of Congress FSA online archives (Many prints are washed out and developed out of focus—FSA lab work drew Lange's ire.) Exhibits of her FSA photographs rely heavily on her California or trans-country FSA work from the northwest and northeast (Fifth Avenue limos!).

Her California work includes the most famous of the Library of Congress' 12.5 million photographs, Lange's 1936 portrait of a



displaced Native American mother with three of her children, one an infant. A print by her of a 1934 San Francisco photograph,

“White Angel Bread Line,” sold for \$822,400 in an October 2005 Southeby’s auction.

Yet a major chapter of this portrait photographer who went from commercial and retail jobs, to society and business portraits, to being credited with expanding the genre of documentary photography, to fame and exclusive auction sales, is missing without a careful review of her Southern work, a work that stretches and affirms her techniques with people and places daily unfamiliar, photographed for long periods on the fly, but rendered as if she—and we—knew their private moments all our lives. Lange remembers the context of the work: “That freedom that there was, where you found your own way, without criticism from anyone, was special. That was germane to that project. A person expands when he has an important thing to do.”

Lange was an American daughter of an German immigrant family. Her extended family included a brother, three grand uncles (all skilled lithographers), two grand aunts, a school teacher and a nurse; her great-grandmother; her mother, a librarian and juvenile probation supervisor; two brothers and a seamstress grandmother, all settled in New Jersey and lower Manhattan.

As a child she roamed New York City alone, from the Bowery to Harlem.

At twenty-three, she and a girl friend (she, a dark room developer; her friend, a Western Union operator) set out for San Francisco. After being robbed by a pick-pocket and losing all of their money, Lange began her independent career developing film in a downtown San Francisco luggage and stationery store.

## “Some Specialness Within”

At age forty, she was again on the road, in the South, to places where time and living had a different feel than New Jersey, San Francisco or the Southwest. The South was physical, restricted; its grasp of purpose separated from the hands of those who lived and worked its land. Southern society organized contradictory ideals into a life from which there was no exit; sharecroppers and tenant farmers lived in a world where others wielded power and control. Somebody else took privilege over the basic choices of their lives,

and this power intruded into their living, approving a plight without apparent escape.

Those who challenged the system experienced violence and terror. The South that appeared idyllic, with easy nudges, erupted. The Depression was in far away America. The South's numbing poverty was always close at hand. Yet Dorothea Lange never compromises or shades with despair the record of what she sees. The experiences that guided her life furnish the method of her photographs: to observe others closely and be open to their stories. The authority of freedom is the living breath of the land, its people. "It passes," Emily Dickinson writes, "and we stay." In the faces Lange photographs, it informs the "vision of their possibility" (157).

Lange plunged into this land where life was a prison of no relief, a land whose crumbling structures were built on psychic beliefs of injustice that most people ignored and were powerless to confront.

Many of her photographs are exemplars of hope. She was making portraits of people freed from slavery by the civil war, photographing their descendants. She made images of the people,

white and black, who lived and worked the land, farming by hand, mired in debt, displaced. Of mothers with too many children and too little food, with dreams; without means.

They were indefatigable in spirit; they celebrated the irony of the compliant and defiant. As their witness, Lange and other FSA photographers (less than fifteen!) compiled 207,000 images of people, conditions; a deep look inside a boundless landscape.

Dorothea Lange's unerring instincts about people led her path through a seamless, guarded society. Navigating the South in the 1930s as her photographs did, required careful skill.

The paradox of the South, and perhaps America, is a mask of transparency that opens only at certain times, that rivets our attention yet protests its view as an indiscretion. Somehow through the landmarks of veils, misery and scorn where "humanity confronts the fates" (235), Lange found the implicit awareness of the heroic scale of people facing forces beyond their control (235).

For some, her photographs were cause for protest. Her hard edged, pastoral, idyllic photographs "put the boot on the wrong foot." The work of the FSA was considered dangerously subversive.

Its expanding archives of photographs was touted as “an organized conspiracy to undermine the status quo in rural America.” Long after, Beverly Brannan, a curator at the Library of Congress, told Dorothea Lange’s granddaughter Dyanna Taylor in a film interview that in their time Lange’s photographs were thought to be “purely propaganda for communism. That’s what they thought, propaganda for communism. But you are looking into the eyes of history.”

When a people grasp the force of their history, it endures, no matter how poor or oppressed. Lange finds history’s passage and authority in Southern faces. Around her is its source. It springs from the dirt. From seed, shoots push up to break ground. It springs from branches as fruit. It pelts the earth as rain. Every Southerner who worked the land knows this once-multiplied assurance—all life grows with a creative force. No matter their poverty or position, or “chances,” their veil or footprint of misery, they knew this enduring force; they felt it, observed it, touched it and took it in their hands.

They told its “spinning yarns,” its tall and haunted tales. Yarns salved laughter on the porch’s splintered, broken edges. The tales’

creative twists took away the conundrum of cotton being more valuable than the hands that grew it and spun it. They recognized that sad fact with a laugh from the night before, before the day’s temperature touched their skin; before they could see or smell or hear change in the air.

Dorothea Lange’s photographs present what Library of Congress poet Robert Hayden, in his poem, “Middle Passage,” termed “the timeless will.” The people she illuminates knew its seasons and hardships. And by degrees, she leaned on its grave persistence in places where burials were marked by broken lamps.

“Many times I encountered courage, real courage,” Dorothea Lange recalled. The courage to let go, to wait and seek, in a place where freedom is a surrender that avoids simple measures of gain or loss to advance by its own means.

The South is a vast region of different landscapes. From mountains and sand hills to fertile plains to coastal forests, and oxbow rivers, bayous and swamps; with Native American, English, Scot, Irish, French and other heritages tied by uneasy relations with Africans whose descendants were a majority of its rural farm population. The South Dorothea Lange photographed was a place

of family secrets, whispered scandals, and open scorn. But tangled up underfoot is bright, quiet judgment as long and sure as the elephant's memory. Something analogous to the moon behind the clouds, hidden and shining; its steady presence as important as its indigo light.

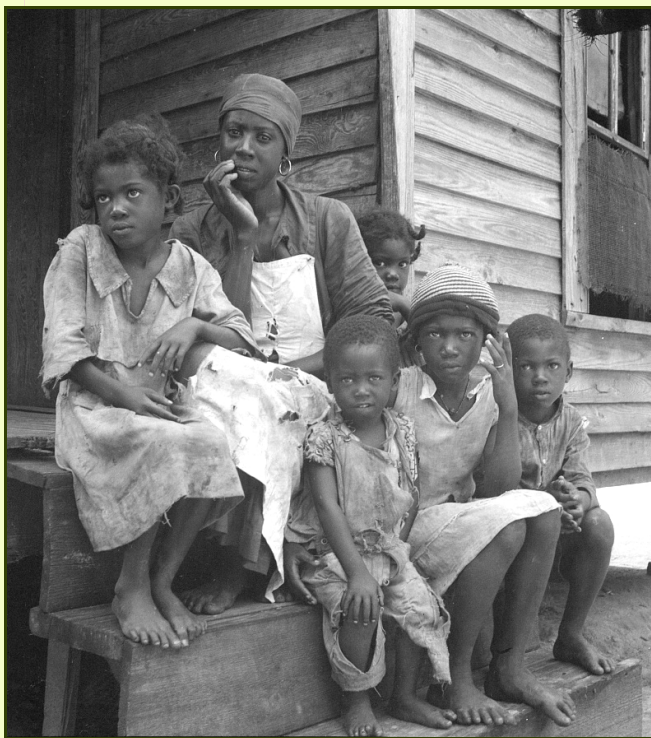
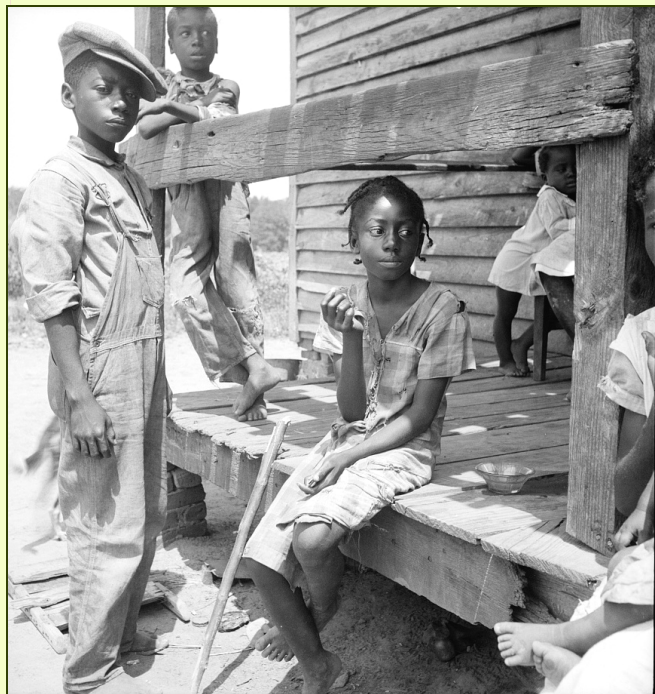
For four years, Dorothea Lange found and recorded its fire, form, and truth. Her work found in the anatomy and spirit of the elephant, something phenomenal. Discussing her work for the FSA, she recalled, it “did happen more than once that we unearthed and discovered what had been either neglected, or not known, in various parts of the country, things that no one else seemed to have observed in particular, yet things that were too important not to make a point of (174).”

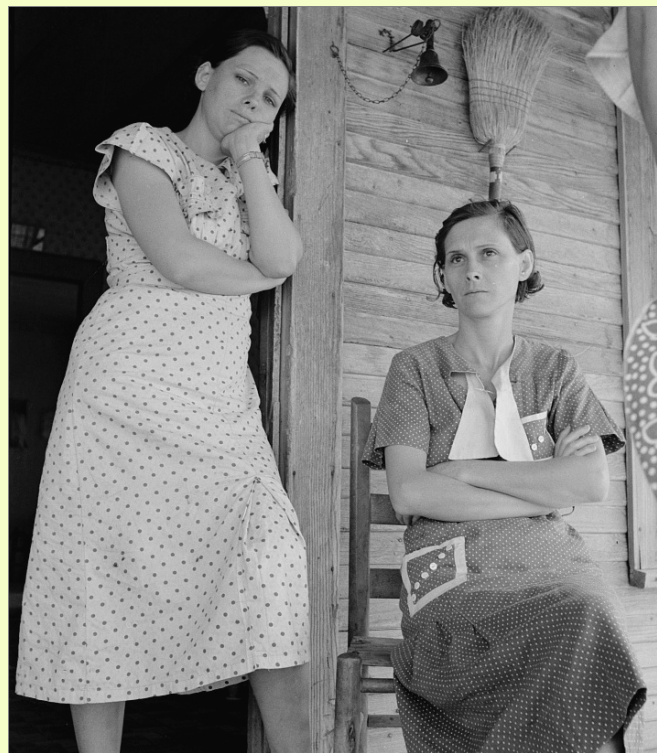
#### Notes

“Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer,” typescript of an oral history conducted by Susan Reiss, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1968, pp. 257. (all page references).

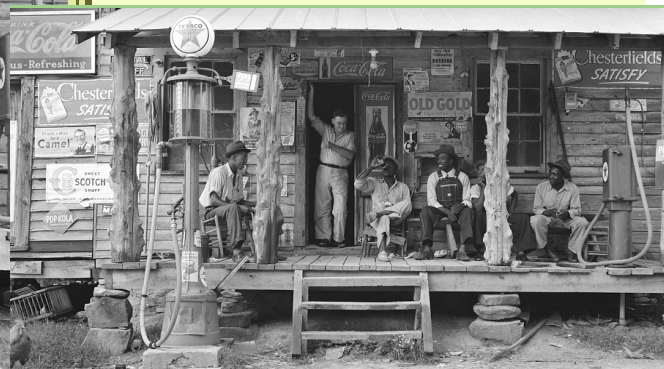
Oral history interview with Dorothea Lange, 1964 May 22. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (unpaged quotes.)













### Notes

All Photographs by Dorothea Lange for the Farmers Security Administration (FSA), from the Library of Congress online collection.

Cover: Oklahoma mother. March 1937.

Hillhouse, Mississippi. Farm infant. June-July 1937.

Leland, Mississippi. Part of a crew of 200 hoe workers. June 1937.

Chesnee, South Carolina. Sharecropper boy. June 1937.

Missouri migrant in Porterville, California. November 1936.

Tennessee woman followed kin to Sacramento. November 1936.

Alabama field worker, chopping cotton field. July 1936.

Mississippi. Delta children. June 1936.

Cordele, Alabama. Turpentine worker's family. Father's wages, \$1.00 a day. July 1936.

Memphis, Texas. Women (kin) on relief. June 1937 (2).

Person County, North Carolina. Family of tobacco sharecroppers. July 1939 (3).

Person County, North Carolina. Country Store. June 1936.

Musculla, Georgia. Peach pickers. 75 cents a day. June 1936.

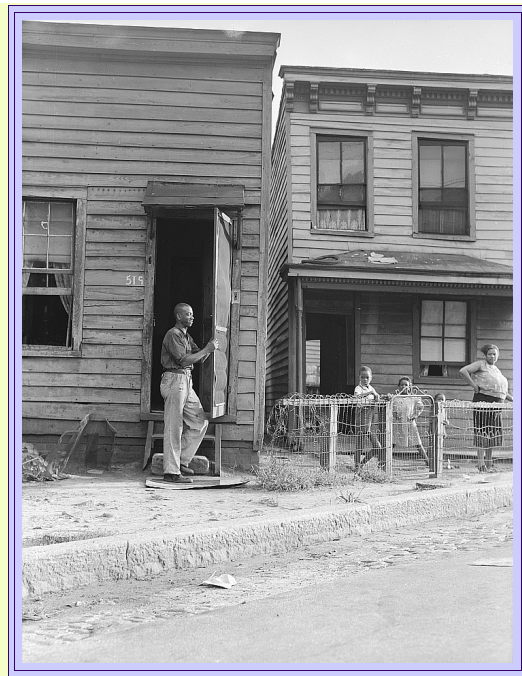
Back cover: Eutaw, Alabama. Hoe workers. July 1936.

Sub-titles (in order) are phrases from Gwendolyn Brooks poems, "do not be afraid of no" (2), "A Sunset of the City" (2), "Of Robert Frost."

## Virginia.

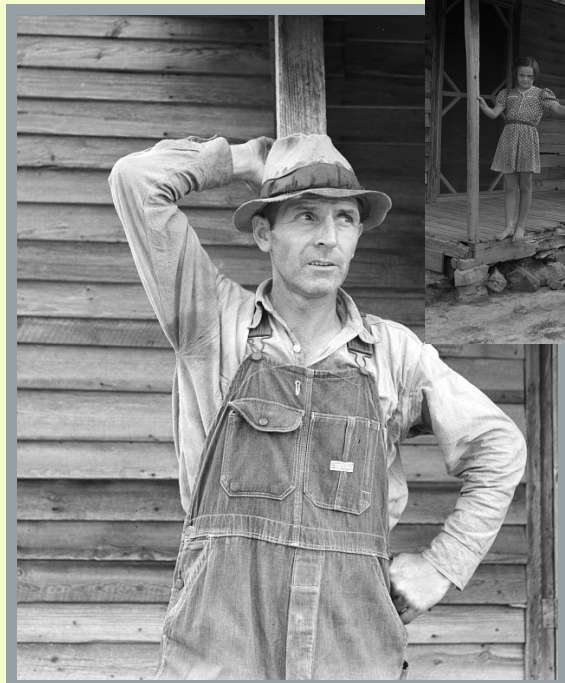


Sperryville. Cradling wheat. Never heard of a combine harvester.  
"Sure would like to see that." June 1936.



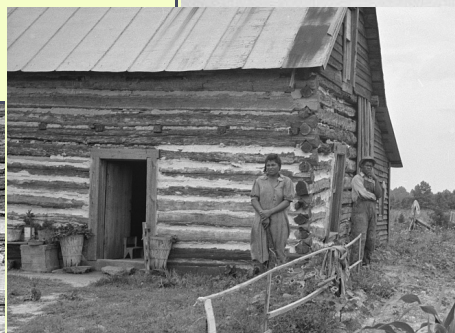
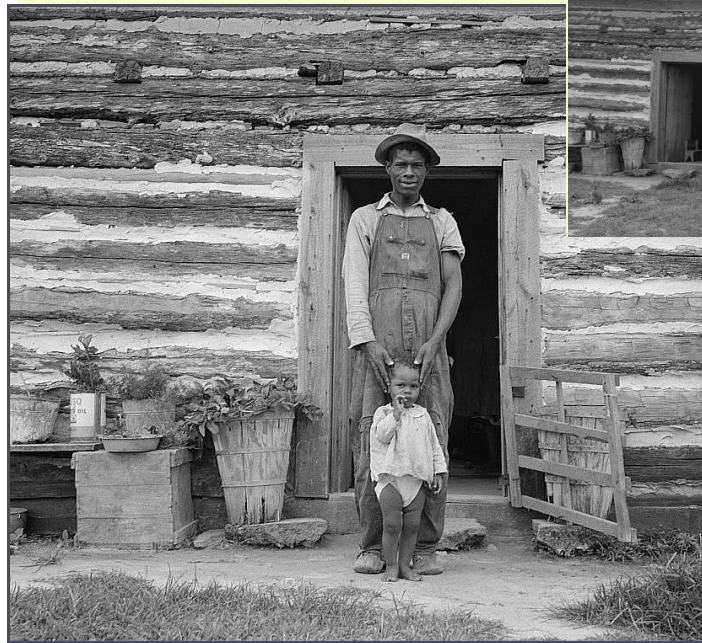
Richmond. \$12 a month rent. August 1938.

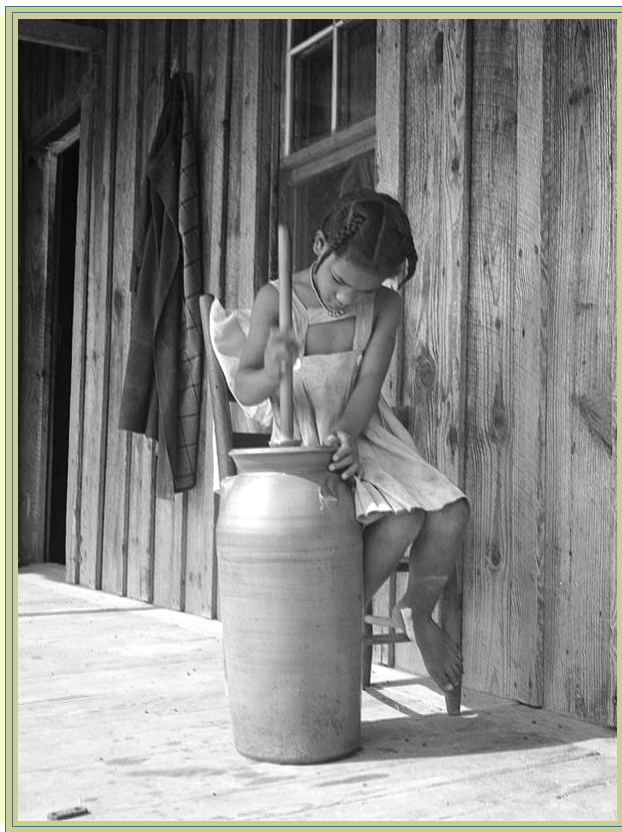
North Carolina.







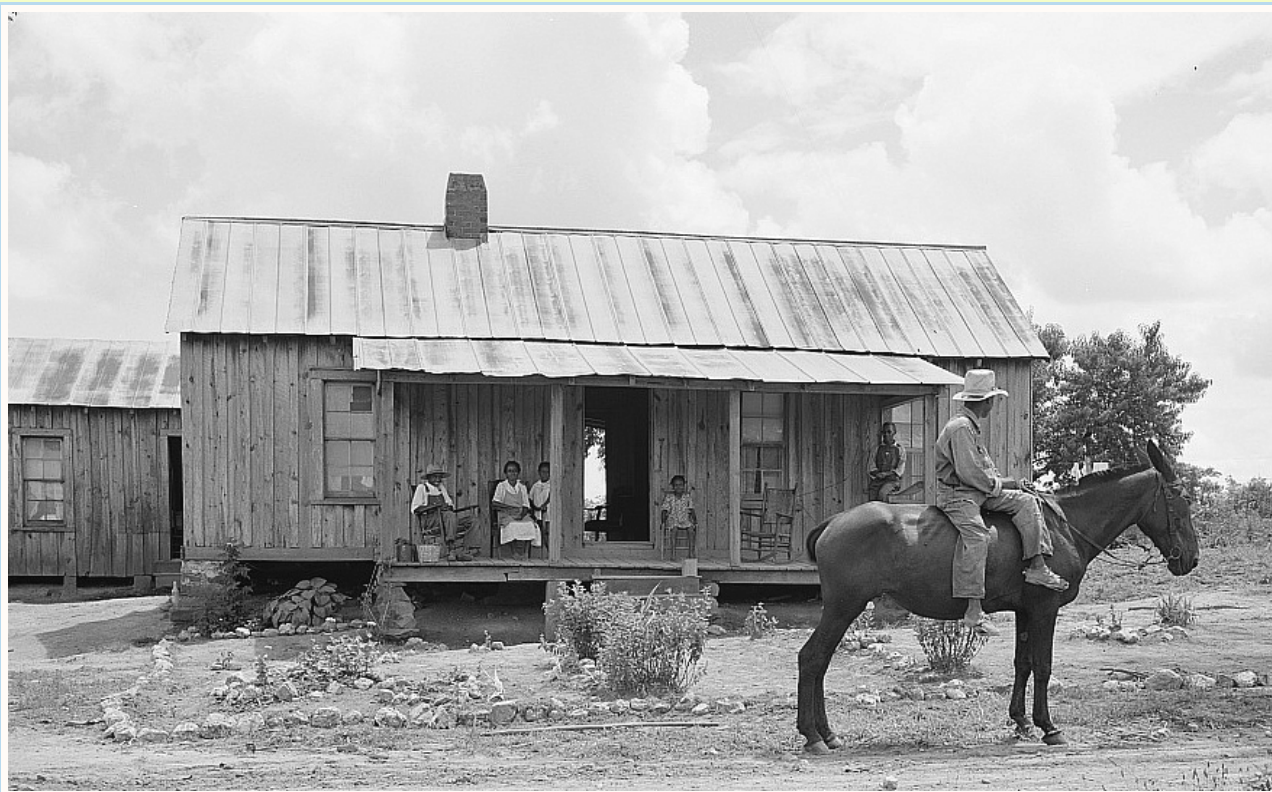




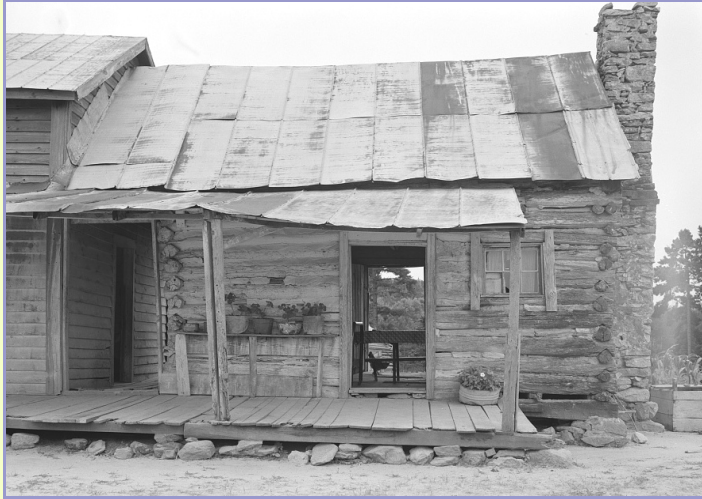














## North Carolina.

p. 25 Roxboro, Person Cty. Tenant cabin and family. July 1939 (3).

p. 26 Porch. Person Cty. July 1939.

p. 27 Person Cty. Tobacco Sharecropper, oldest daughter.  
July 1939 (3).

p. 28 Person Cty. Tenant family with first child. July 1939 (3).

p. 29 Person Cty. Grandfather, aged 69. "Land is like folks,  
it needs a rest." July 1939.

Randolph Cty. Child churning. July 1939.

p.30 Granville Cty. 8 year old helps with tobacco barn. July 1939.

Granville Cty. Tenant grandson. July 1939.

p. 31 Caroline Atwater sweeping the yard. July 1939.

Person Cty. Egg gathering. July 1939.

p. 32 Person Cty, Olive Hill. Tenant and daughter farming sweet  
potatoes. July 1939 (2).

p. 33 Pittsboro. Saturday afternoon. July 1939.

p. 34 Wake Cty. Zollie Lyon family. "Dinner at noontime." July 1939.  
Person Cty. Wheeler Church ladies. July 1939.

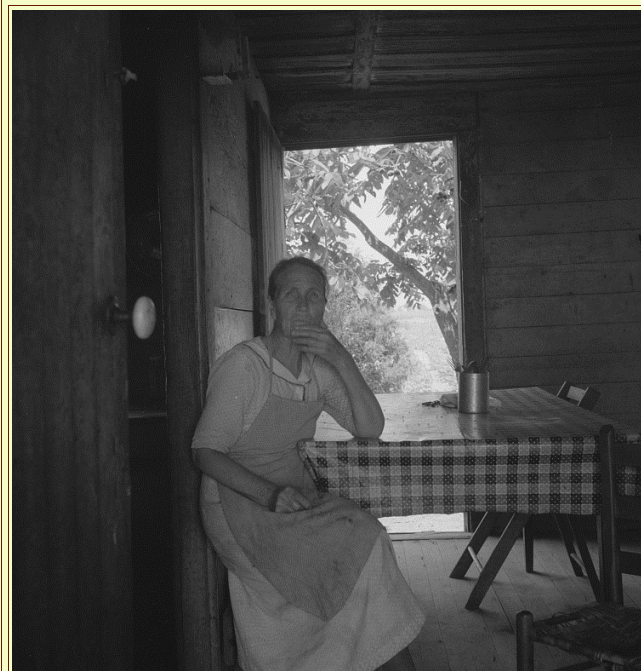
p. 35 Olive Hill house. "Note flowering plants in cans." July 1939.  
Person Cty. Hillside Farm road. July 1939.

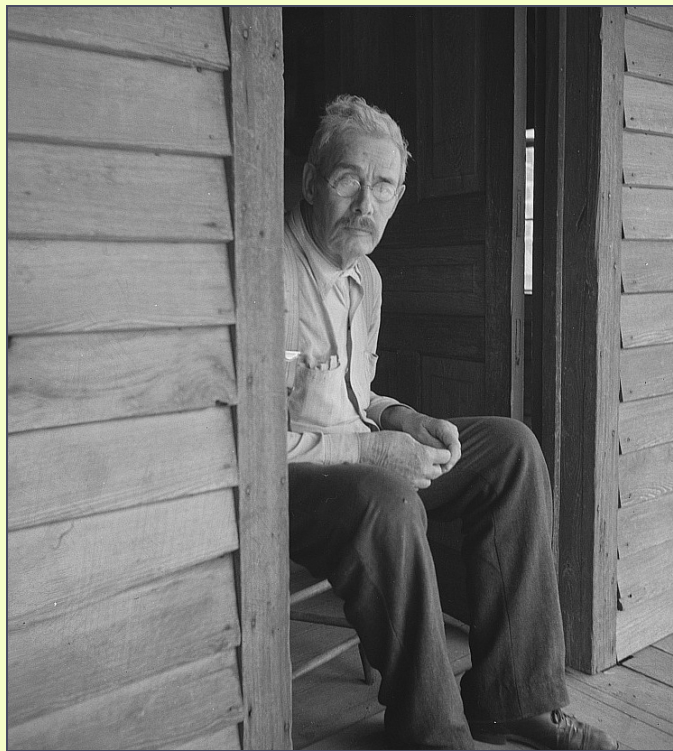
p. 36 "The Queen." Wheeler Church. July 1939 (2).

p. 37 Granville Cty. Tenant's Granddaughter. July 1939.



South Carolina.









## South Carolina.

p. 38 Chesnee. Grandmother of 56 (2).

p. 39 Chesnee. Grandfather of 56. July 1937.

South Carolina livery stable. July 1938.

p. 40 Chesnee. Family on the porch. July 1937.

Chesnee. Sharecropper's family on the porch. July 1937.

p. 41 Gaffney. Child and father on porch. July 1937.

Near Hartsville. "Sorting and stringing the golden leaf." July 1936.

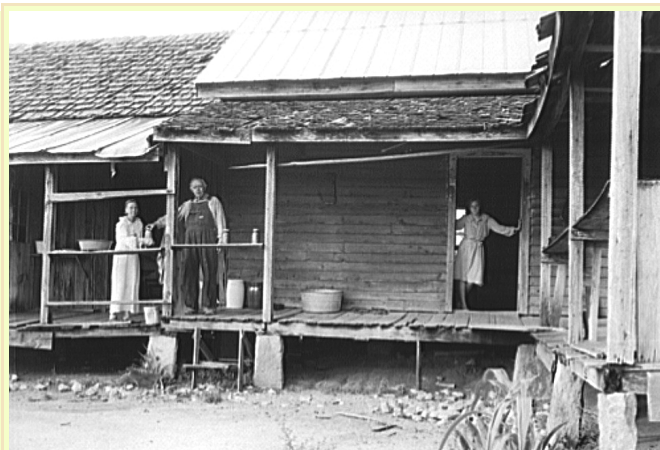
p. 42 Chesnee. Son of a sharecropper. June 1937.

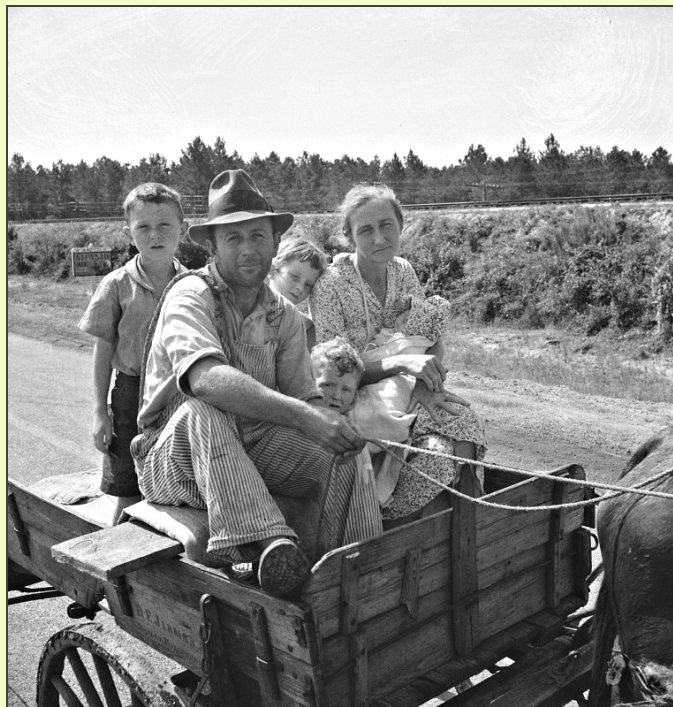
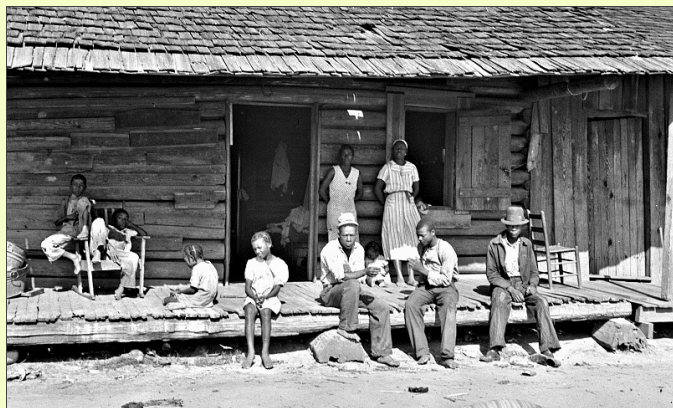


Georgia.

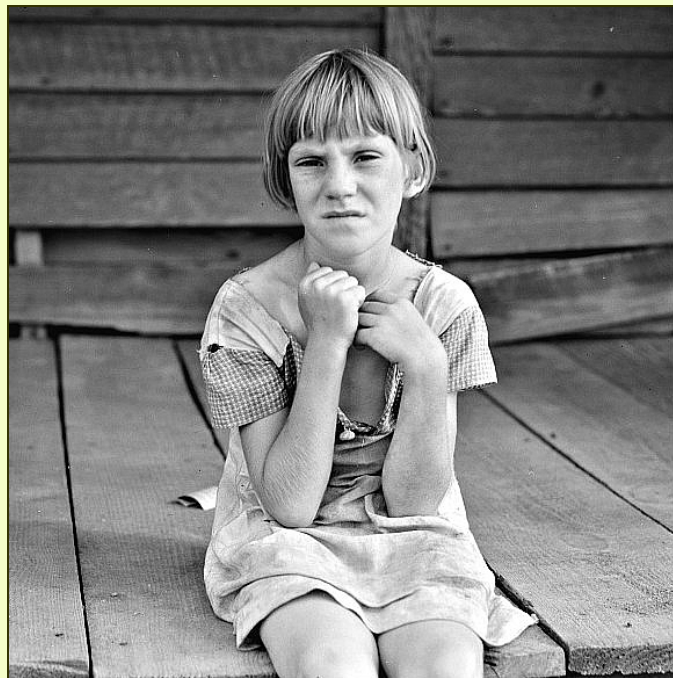
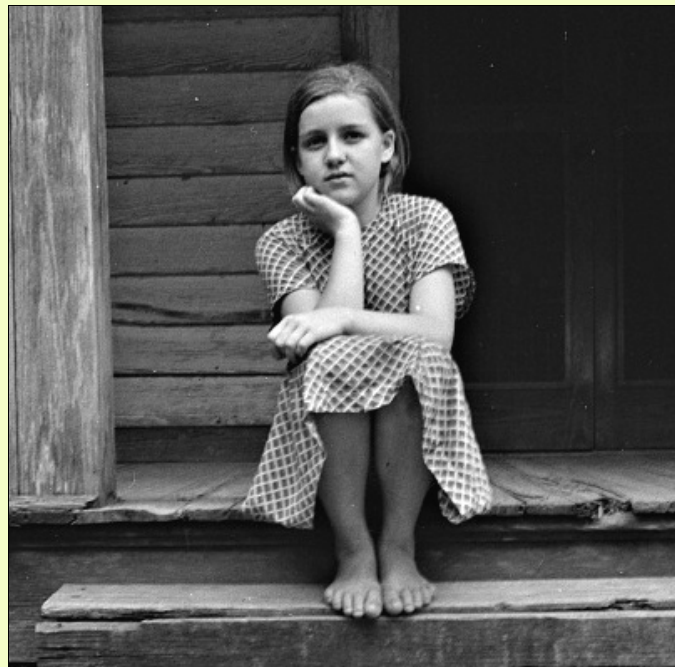


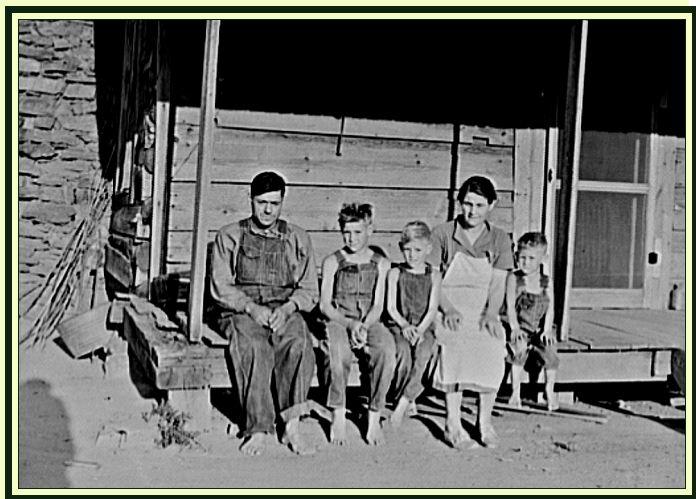


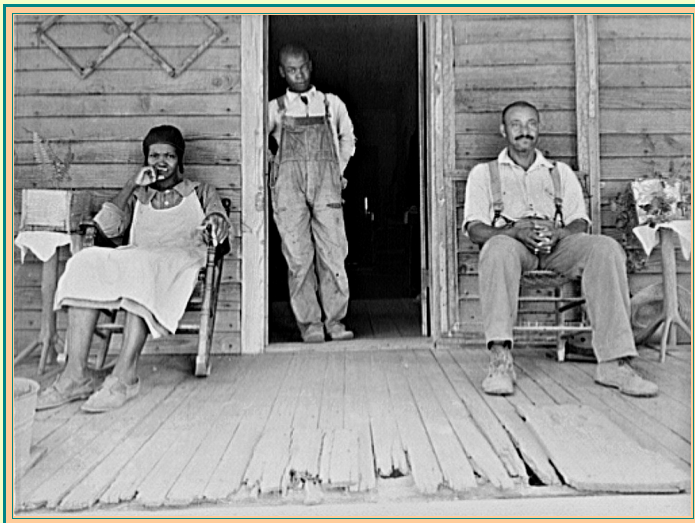




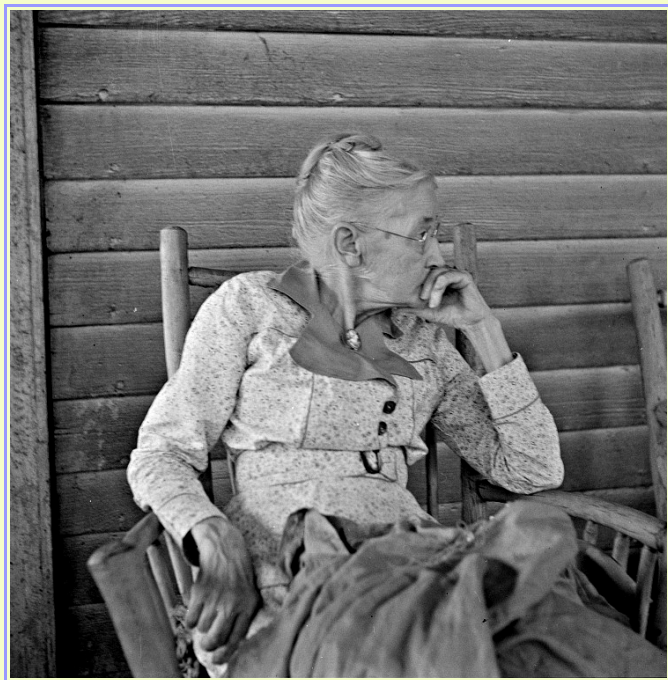


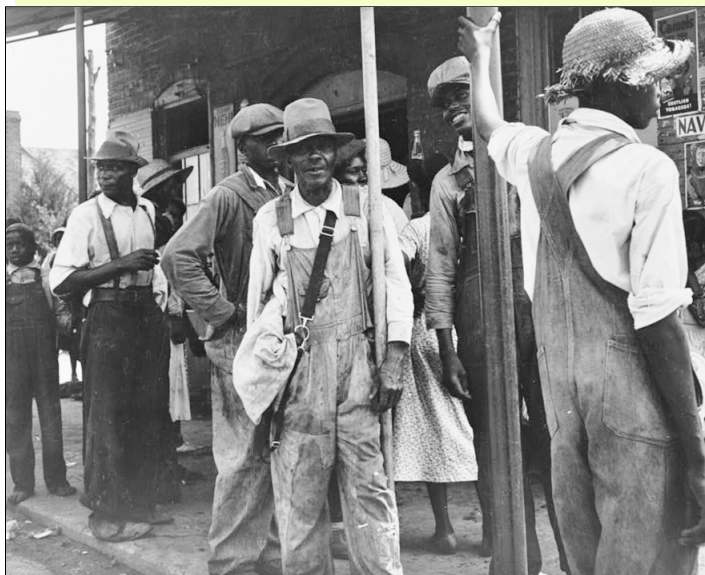




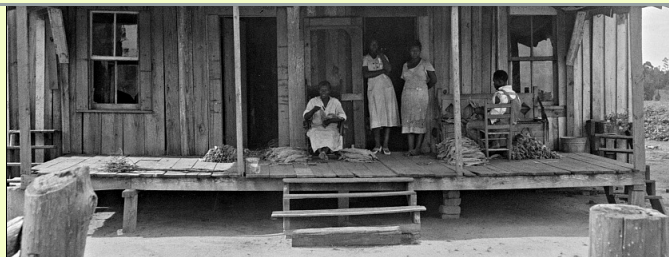
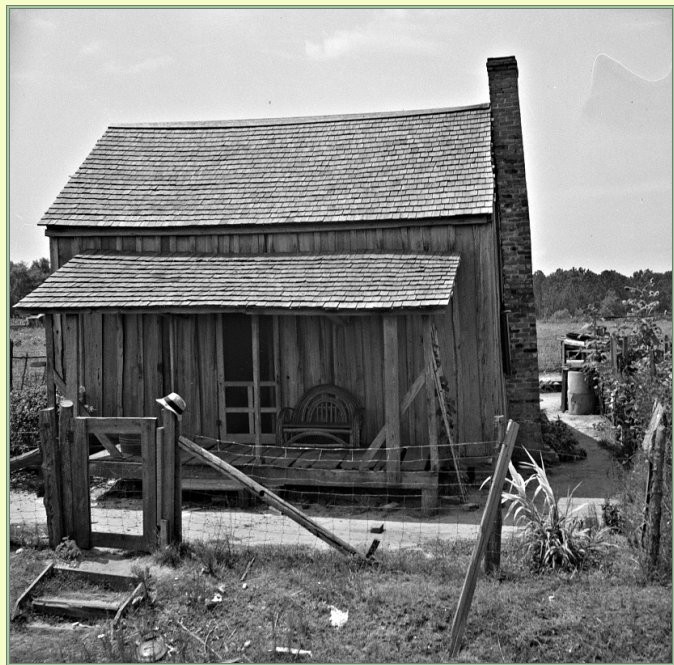












## Georgia.

p. 43 Greene Cty. Sharecropper with a one horse plow. July 1937.

p. 44 Americus. 13 year old plowing. July 1937.

Martins Nests. June 1936.

p. 45 Greene Cty. Fifty year home for cotton farmer's family. Owned the land. July 1937.

Macon Cty. Family earns \$10 "furnish" credit monthly. July 1937.

p. 46 Turpentine worker's house. July 1937. Tifton. July 1938.

p. 47 Hazelhurst. Family. July 1937. Greene Cty. Wash Day. July 1937.

p. 48 Greene Cty. Tenant daughter on the steps of a "big house."

July 1937.

Macon Cty. Family receives \$5 a month "furnish" money. July 1937.

p. 49 Macon. Sharecropper. July 1937.

Macon. Sharecropper father. Lives on furnish credit. July 1937.

p. 50 Greene Cty. Home owners. July 1937.

Greene Cty. Ex-slaves. July 1937.

p. 51 Macon Cty. Cotton sharecropper's family. July 1937 (3).

p. 52 Wray Plantation. "Lady of the old school on the veranda."  
July 1937.

No location given. Farmer's daughter. July 1937.

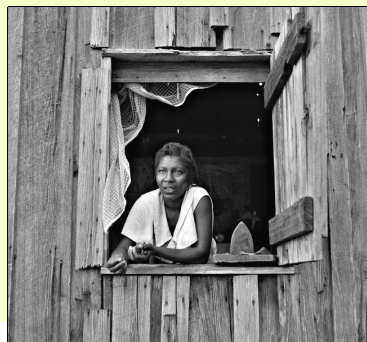
p. 53 Muscella. Peach pickers. Earning 75 cents a day. June 1936.  
Greene Cty. Sharecroppers who "produce little, sell little, buy little."  
June 1937.

p. 54 Abandoned plantation house. Occupied by ex-slaves. July 1937.  
Marshallville. Plantation owner's house. July 1937.

p. 55 Godswenville. Turpentine worker's house. July 1937.  
Greene Cty. Home owned since 1913. Family raised 10 children.  
July 1937.

Douglas. Tobacco sharecropper's house. July 1938.

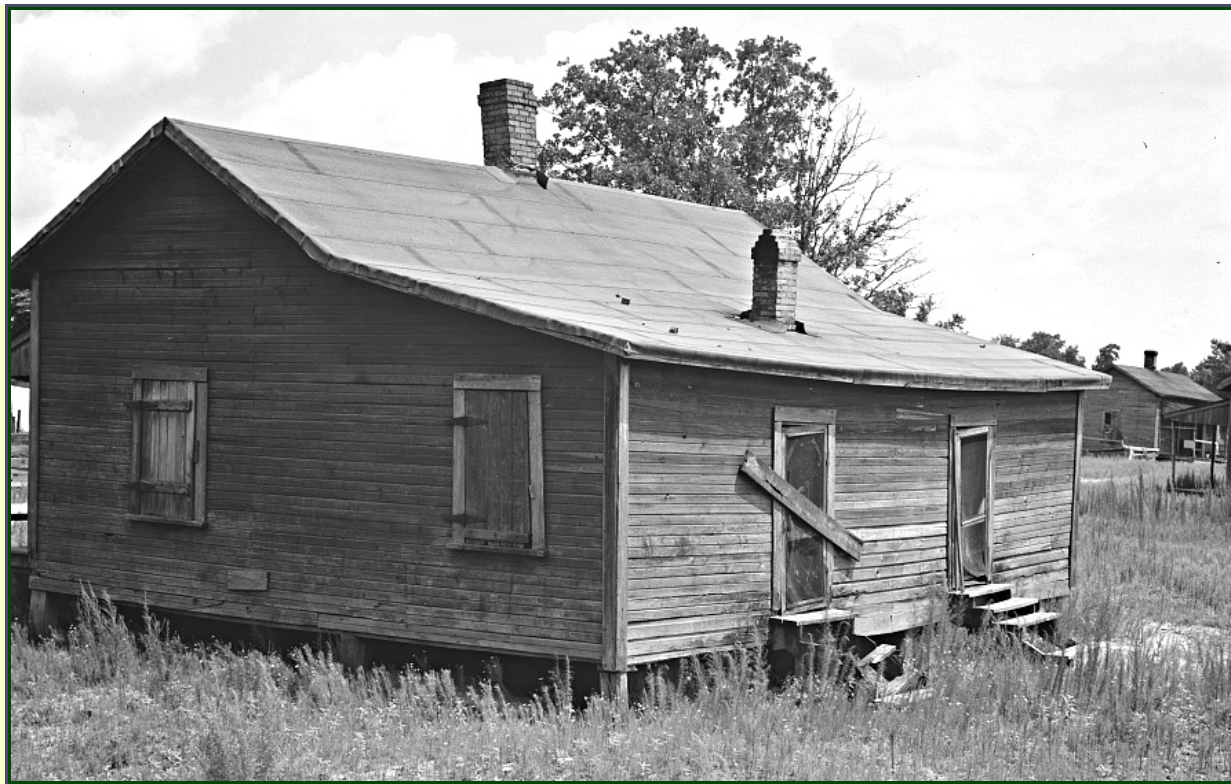
p. 56 Dupont. "Wife of a turpentine worker." July 1937.

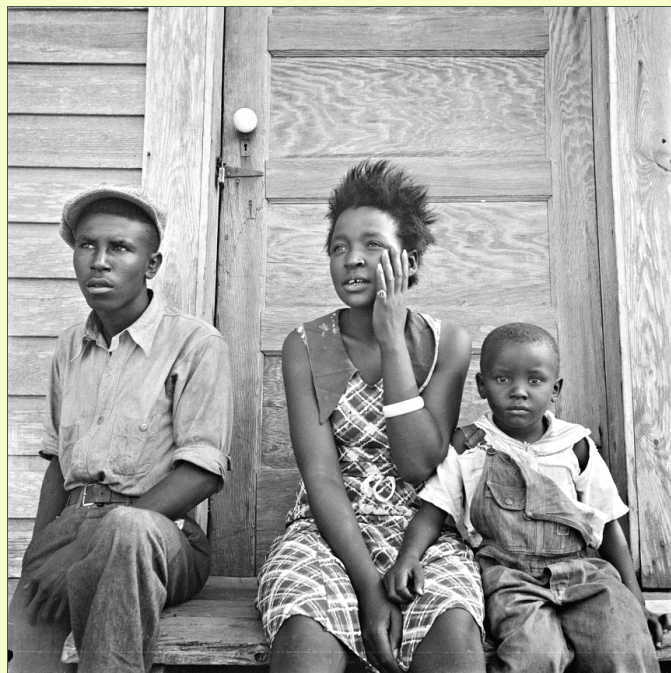
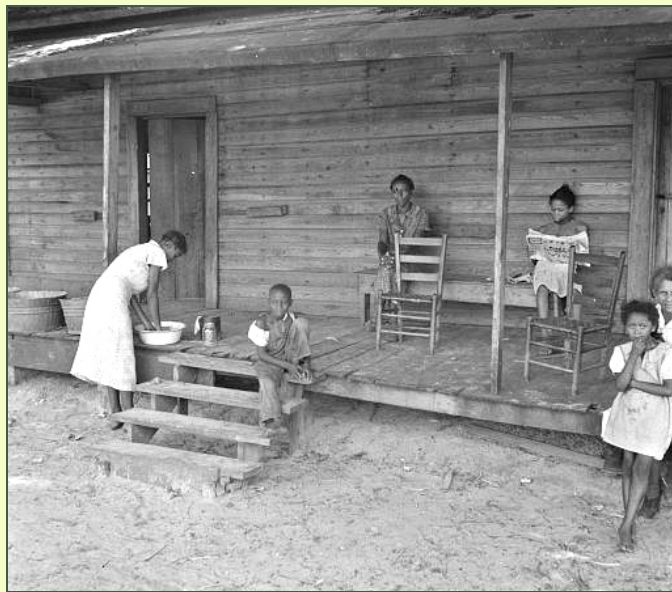


Florida.









## Florida.

- p. 57 "Moving day in turpentine pine forest country." July 1936 (2).  
p. 58, 59 Careyville. "The houses are deserted since the mill closed."  
July 1937 (4).  
p. 59 Deserted house. Lumber mill closed. July 1937.  
p. 60 Careyville. "Stranded residents." July 1937.  
Live Oak. Youth. July 1936.  
p. 61 Marrianna. Turpentine plant. July 1937.



Mississippi.









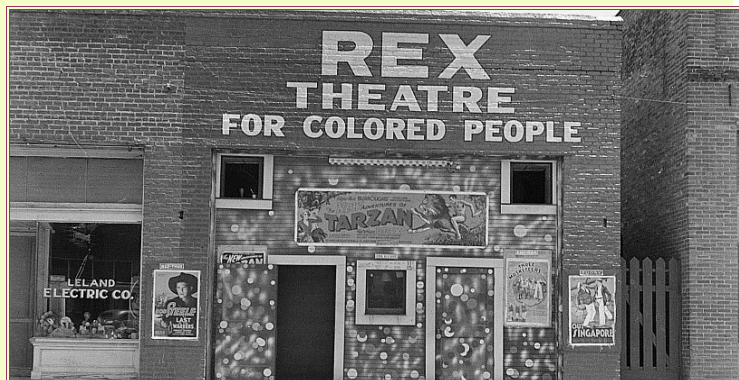


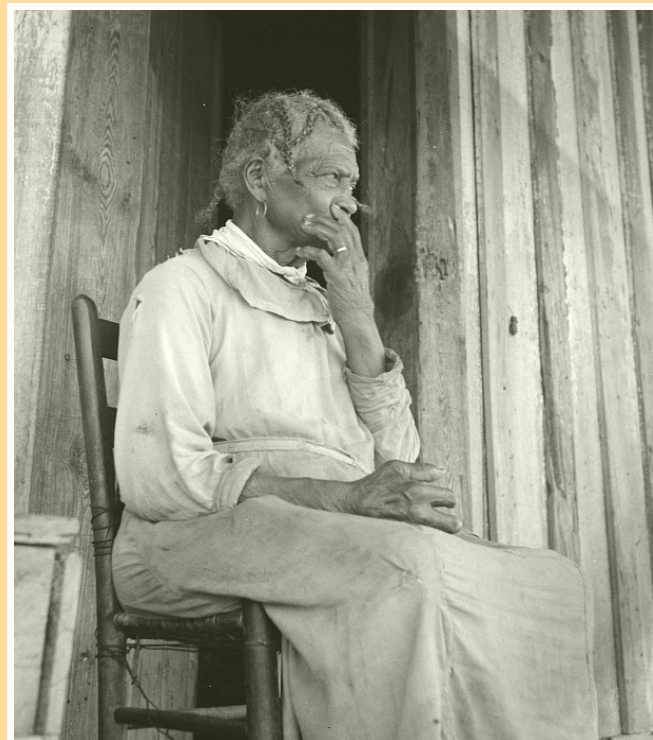


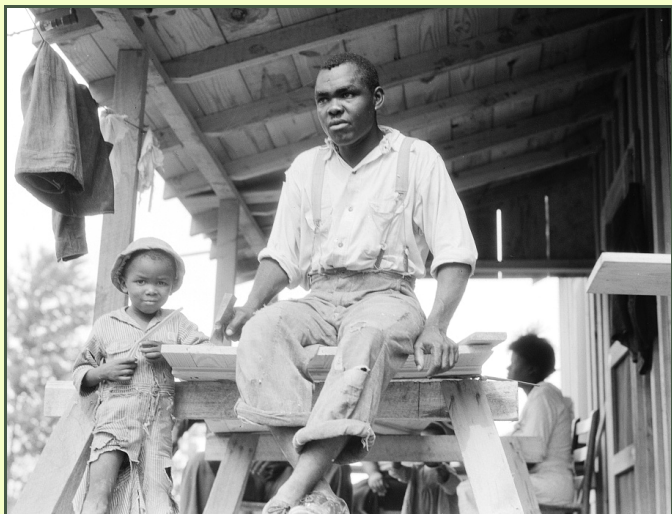


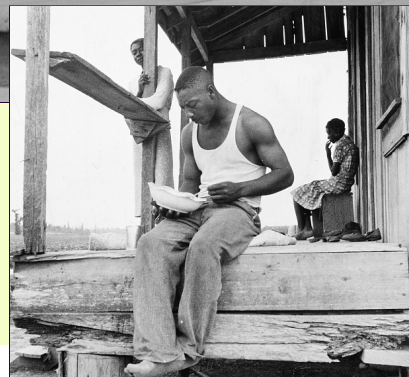
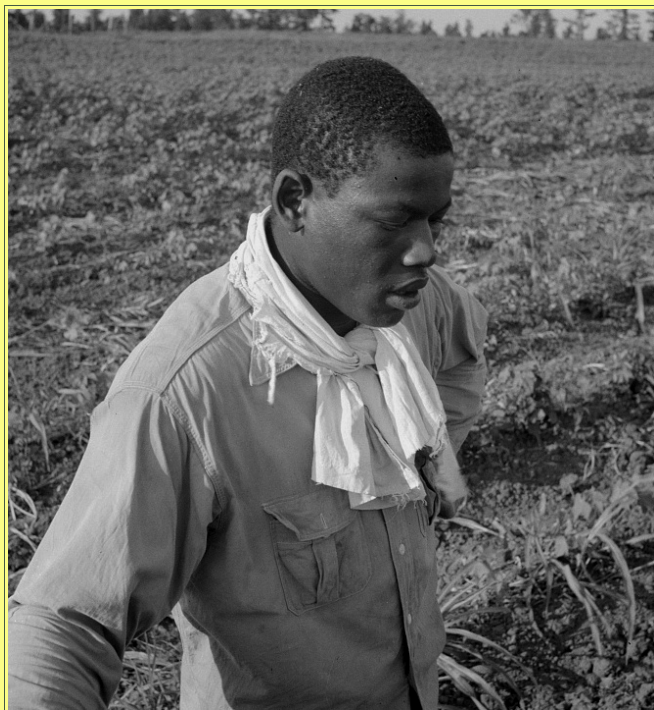


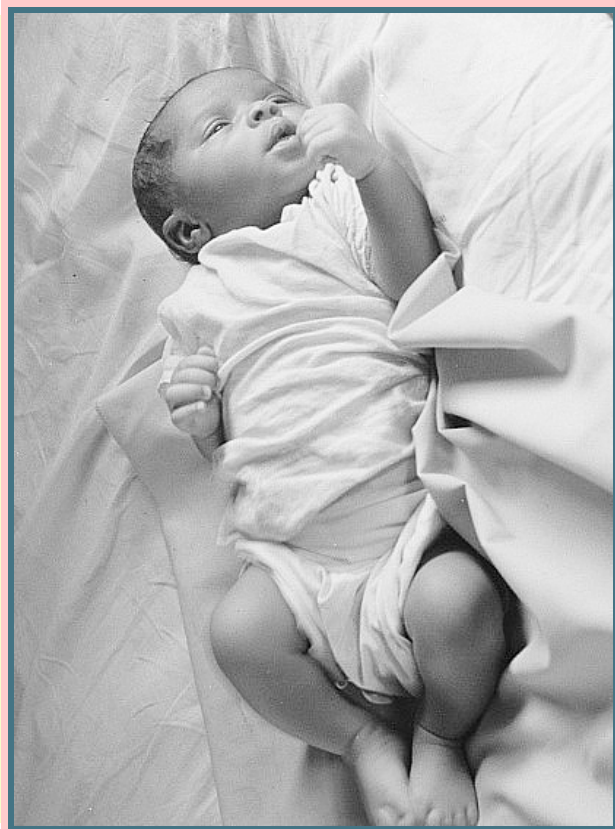


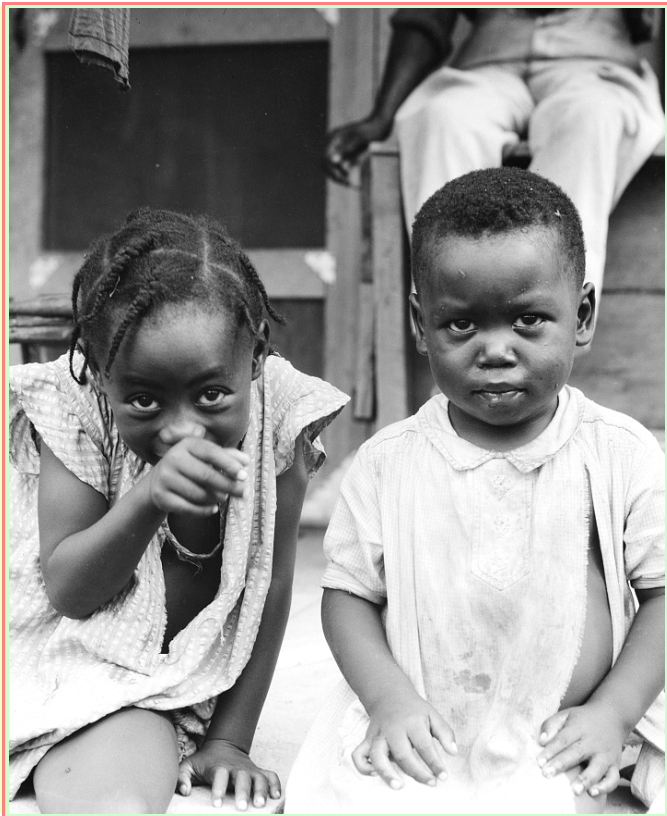


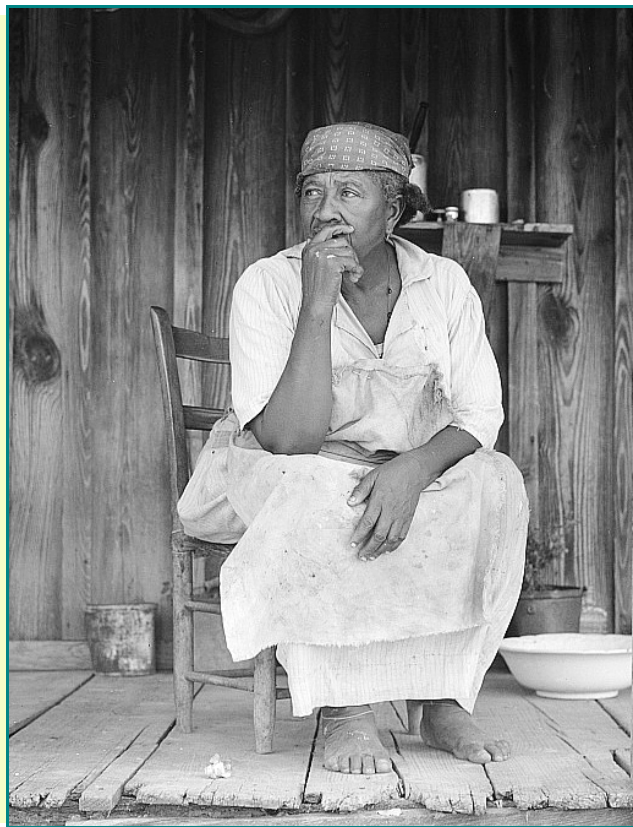


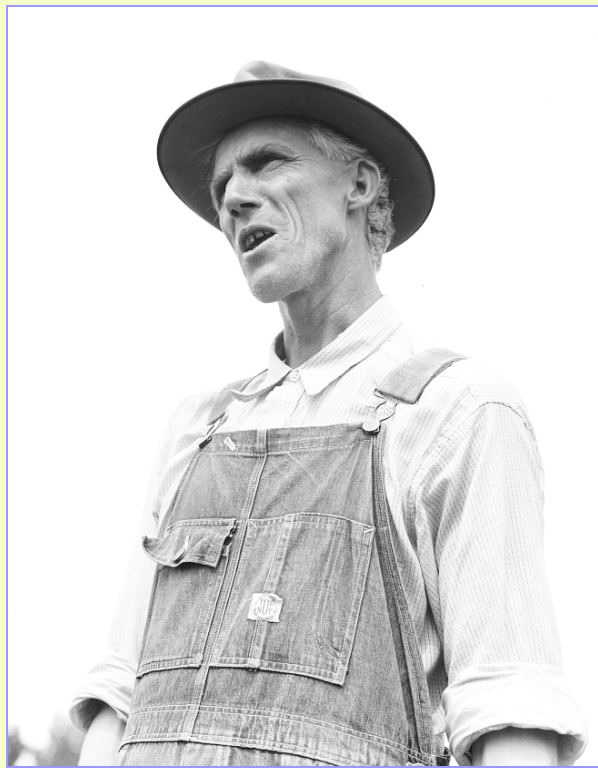


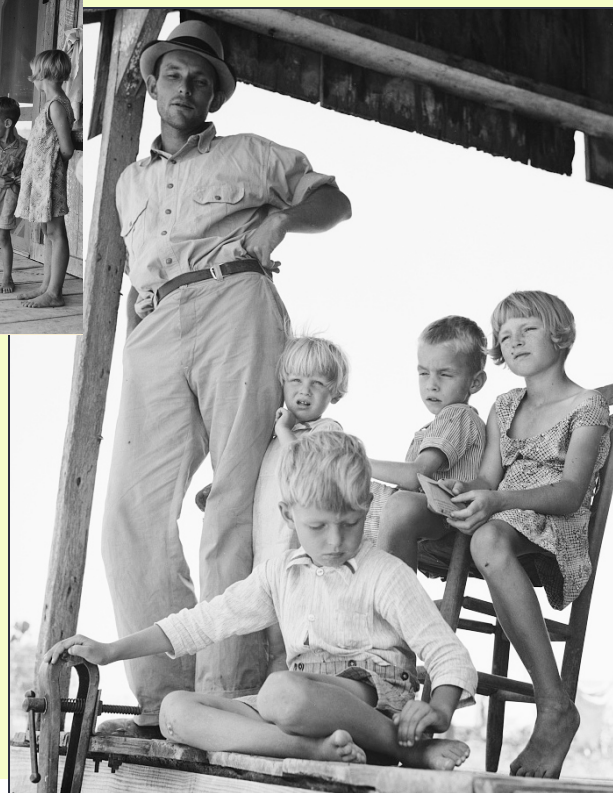
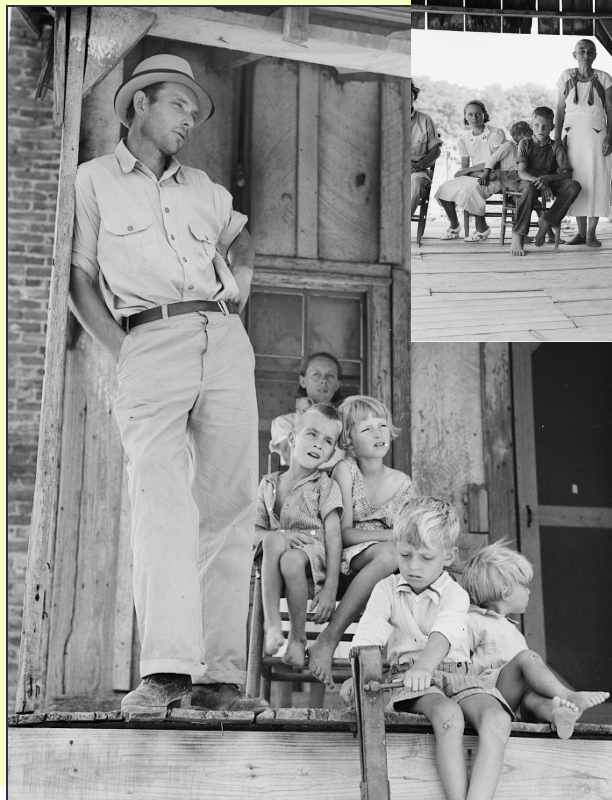




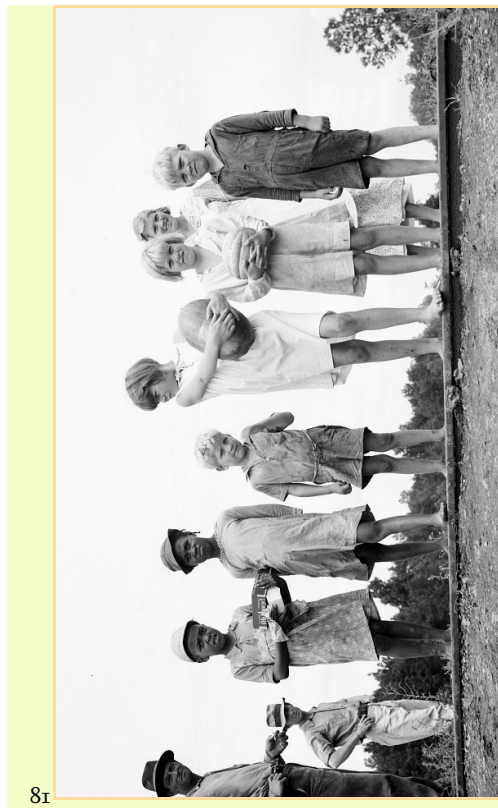














## Mississippi.

p. 62 Bay St. Louis. Ox team. July 1937.

p. 63 Washington Cty. Corn. July 1937 (2).

p. 64 New Carthage. Sourgum mill. August 1938 (3).

p. 65 Alridge Plantation. Crew "to hoe cotton at a dollar a day."  
June 1937.

p. 66 Hazelhurst. Tomato packing shed. June 1937.

p. 67 Alridge Plantation. Abandoned cabin in the middle of a cotton  
field. July 1937.

Eutaw, Alabama. July 1936.

p. 68, 69 Mississippi Highway 1, between Greenville and Clarksdale.  
Laborer's family "moving from Arkansas." June 1938 (3).

p. 70 South Mississippi. "Transportation." June 1936.

p. 71 Mississippi Delta near Greenville. "Negro church." June 1936.  
Leland. Theatre. July 1937.

p. 72 "Born a slave 2 years before the surrender." (The Civil War's end.)  
July 1937 (3).



p. 73 Hill House. Member of the Tenant Farmers Union. July 1936.  
Clarksdale. Cotton hoer. June 1937.

p. 74 Coahoma Cty. Young hoe worker. June-July 1937.  
Clarksdale. Cotton hoer's daughter, family. June-July 1937 (2).

p. 75 Hill House. Children on the Cooperative farm. June-July 1937.  
Hill House. Infant on the cooperative farm. June-July 1937.

p. 76 Sherwood Eddy plantation. Children. July 1936.  
Hill House. Negro girl. June 1936.

p. 77 Hinds Cty. Sharecropper woman." Cotton rules the world."  
June 1937.

No location. Sharecropper's wife. June-July 1937.

p. 78 Issaquena Cty. Delta laborer. June 1937.  
Hill House. J. M. Rees. July 1936.

p. 79 Cleveland. Cotton sharecropper's family. June 1937 (3).

p. 80 Mississippi Delta. Young woman. July 1936.  
"Negro sharecropper and wife." June-July 1936.

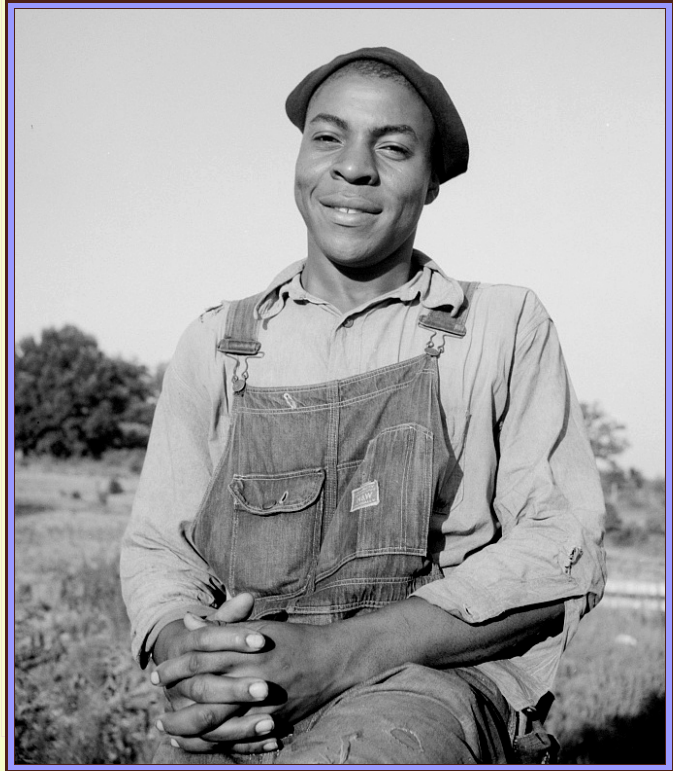
Alridge plantation. Tractor driver. June 1937.  
Greenville. Paddle Wheeler. June-July 1936.

p.83 Clarksville. Hoers on the way to the fields. June-July 1937.

p. 84 Negro girl. June 1936.

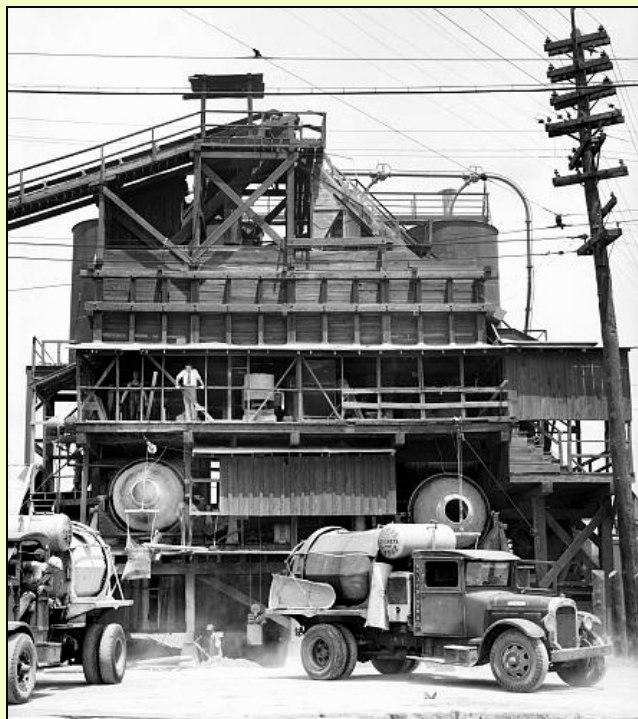


Alabama.









## Alabama.

p. 85 Birmingham. "Negro farmhand." July 1936.

Eutaw. "Plough boy sitting on fence." June 1936.

p. 86 No location. Plowboy earns 75 cents a day. June 1936.

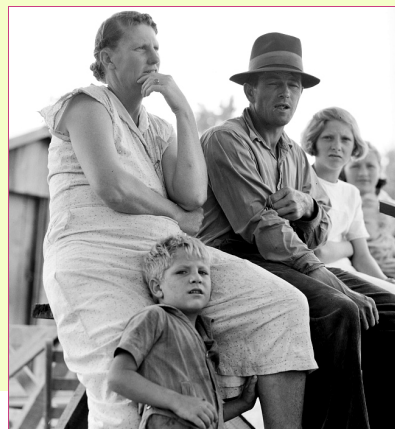
p. 87 Cordele. Children. Father earns \$1.00 a day. July 1936 (3).

p. 88 Birmingham. Concrete mixing plant. June 1936.

Birmingham. Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron Company. June 1936.

p. 89 Eden, "Farm folk" in town. June 1936. Hill House. July 1936.

Robertsdale. Pulpwood on the River Styx. July 1937.



Tennessee.





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## Tennessee.

p. 90, 91 Memphis. Cotton hoers going to work in Arkansas.

June 1937 (3).

p. 92 Memphis. Fish restaurant. June-July 1937.

Dayton. Episcopal Church. (Town held the Scopes trial.) June 1936.

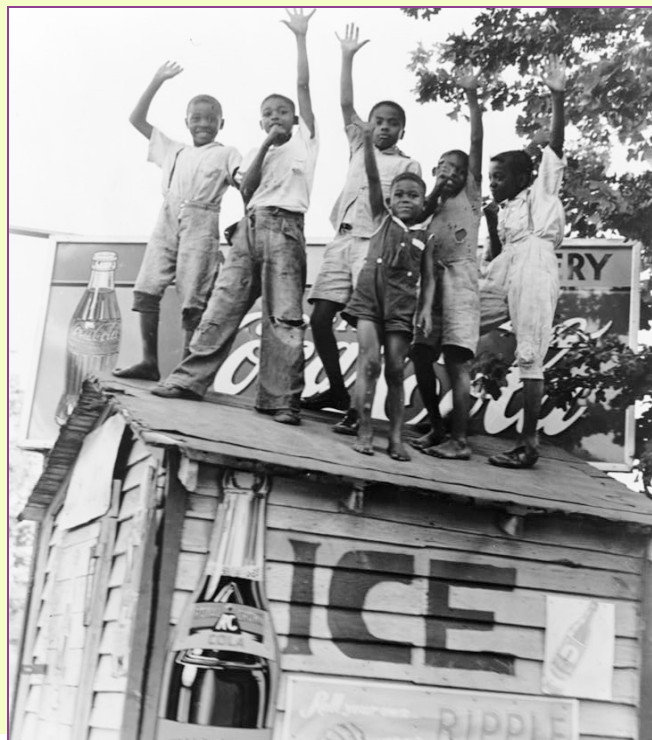
p. 93 Hoers going to Arkansas. June-July 1936. Coal Miner's Daughter.

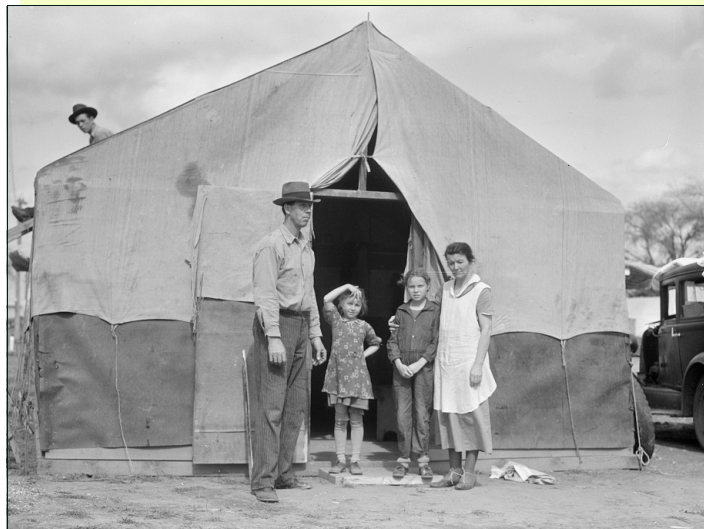
May 1936. Memphis. Butter beans. June 1938.

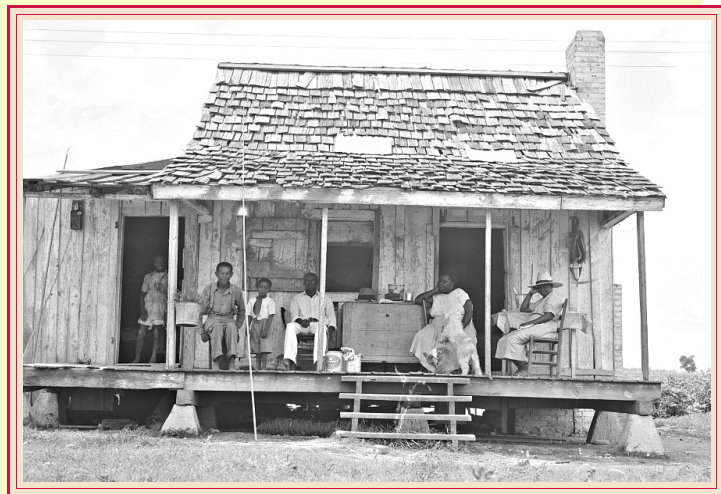




Arkansas.







18000-02



18000-02







## Arkansas.

p. 94 Greenfield, CA. Arkansas girl in an auto camp filled with Arkansans. April 1939.

Little Rock. Boys playing on roof of soda stand. June 1938.

p. 95 Kern Cty, CA. Arkansas family stopped at CA state line; forced to return to AK to borrow \$50 to show before being permitted to enter the state. February 1936.

Family survived a flood. June-July 1938.

p. 96 Arkansas traveler with seven children and his eldest son's family. His quote is the namesake for this volume. "We're bound for Kingfisher (OK, wheat) and Lubbock (TX, cotton). We are not going back to Arkansas; believe I can better myself." June 1938.

Arkansas Delta. Saturday afternoon. August 1938.

p. 97. Tulare Cty, CA. Arkansas mother with 11 children. November 1938 (2).

p. 98 Arkansas family. "All their earthly belongings." May 1937.

p. 99 Conway. Father owned 280 acres. "All done gone." June 1938. Earle. Doing hair. July 1936.

p. 100 Arkansas migrant family playing music. February 1939.

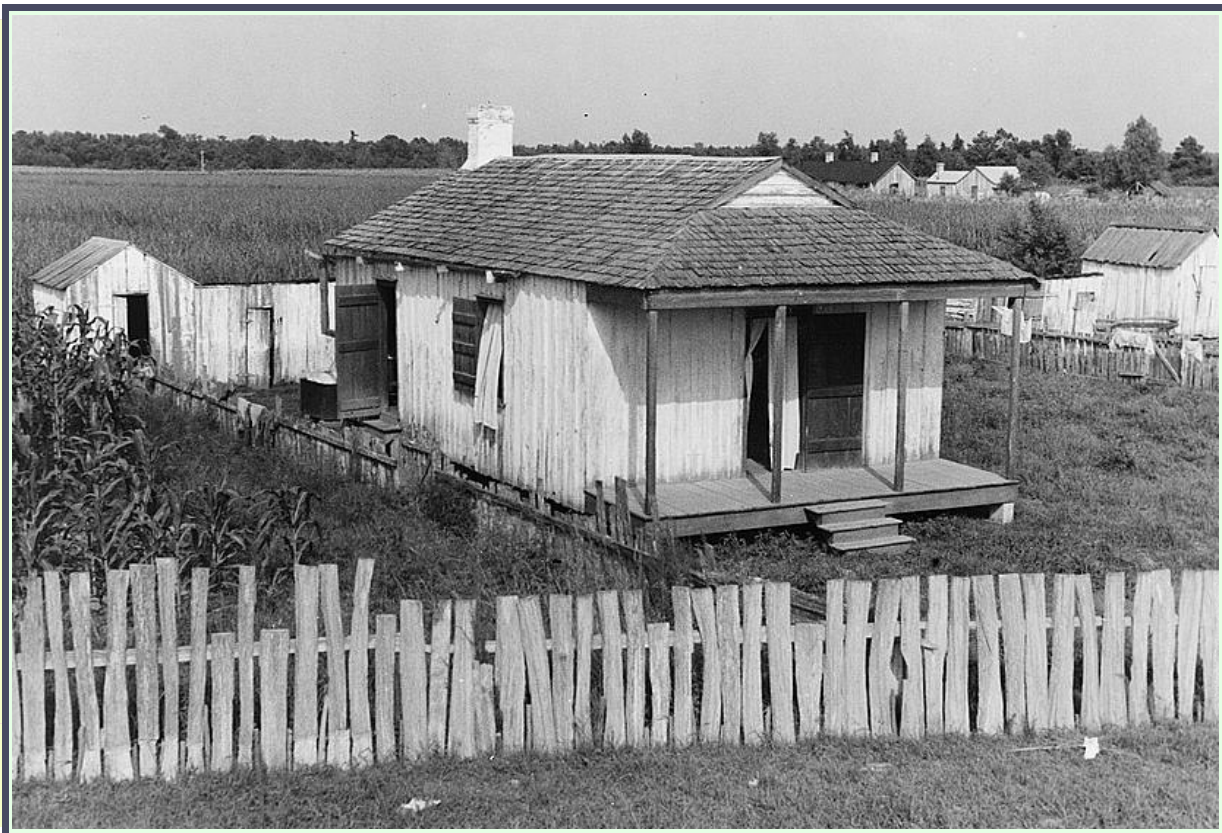


Louisiana.



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## Louisiana.

p. 101 No location. "Louisiana Negress." June 1937.

Former worker at the Fullerton lumber mill. Town abandoned.

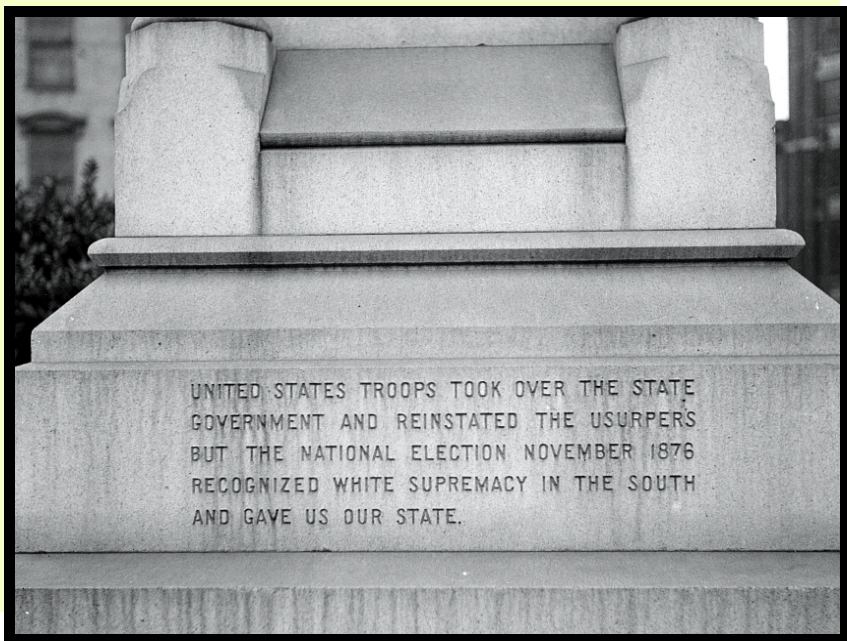
July 1937.

p. 102 Bayou La Fourche. Sugar cane worker's cabin.

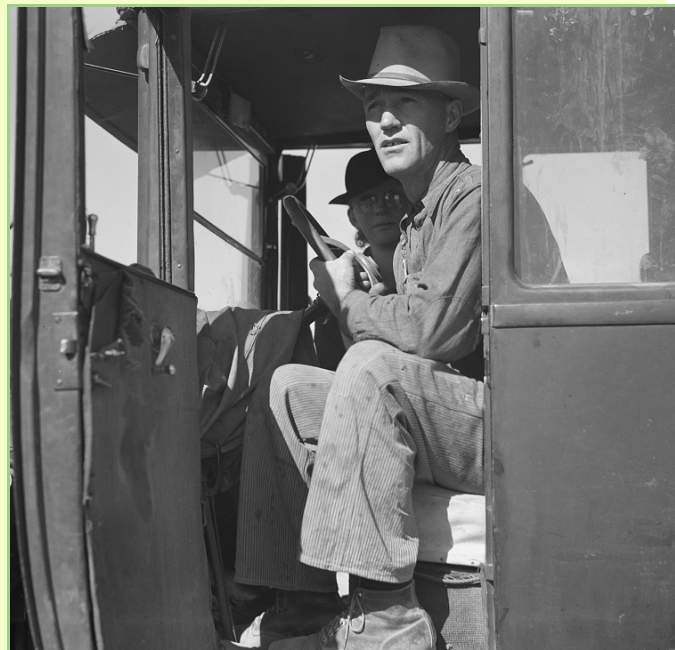
July 1937.

p. 103 New Orleans. "Monument erected to race prejudice."

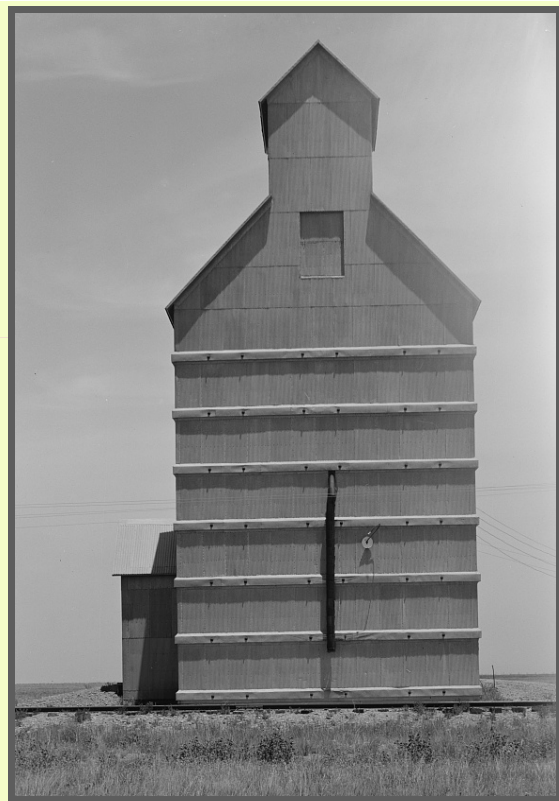
July 1936.



Texas.







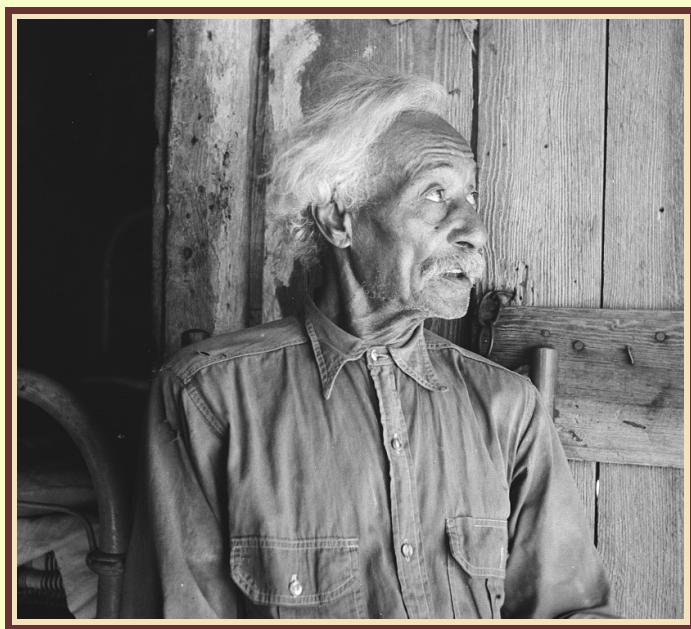
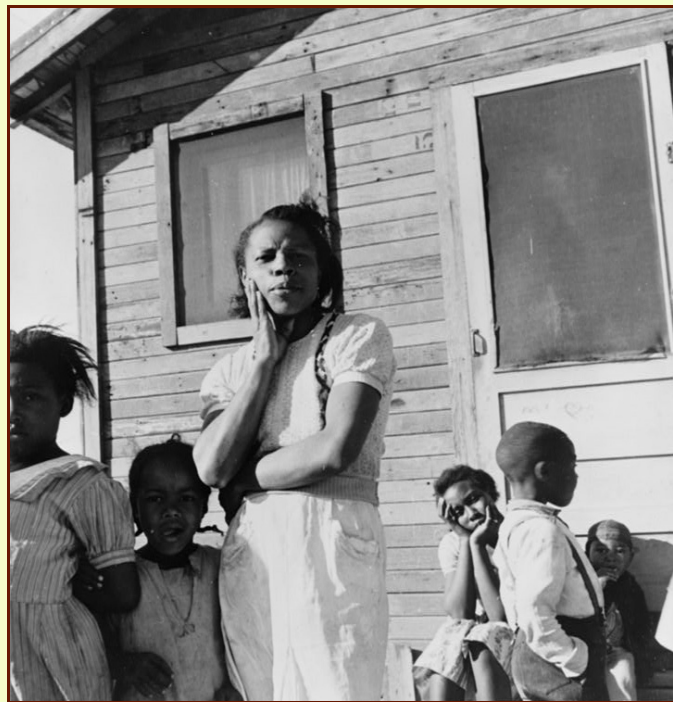


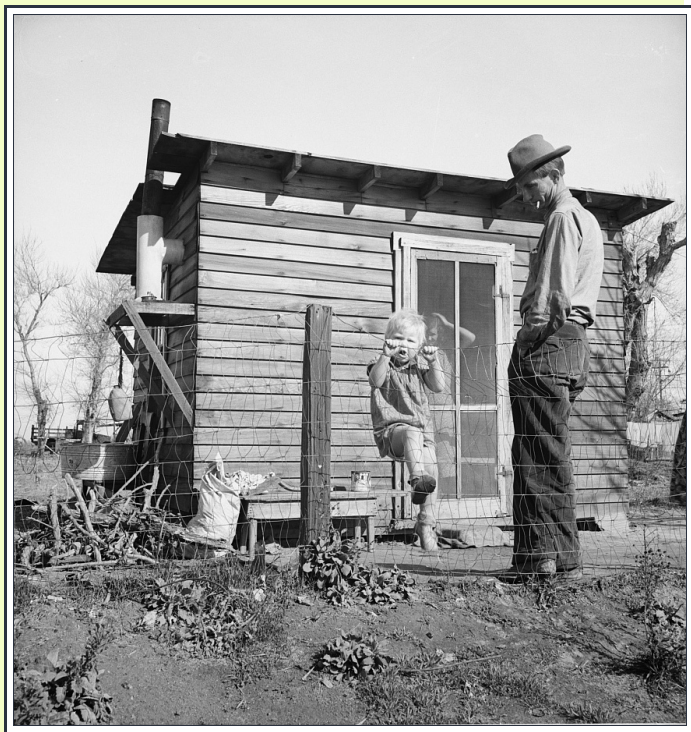












## Texas.

p. 104 Abilene. "Drought refugees." August 1936. No location. Carrot pullers. Together, they make \$1.12 a day. February 1937.

p. 105 Perryton. Opening of wheat harvest. June 1938.  
Between Dallas and Austin. "No food." 3 children. August 1936.

p. 106 Memphis, TX. Tenants displaced by power farming. May 1937.  
Childress Cty. Field. June 1938. Everett. Grain Elevator. June 1938.

p. 107 Kincaid. Wheat field with abandoned house. June 1937.

p. 108 Childress. Wife and mother with 3 children. June 1938 (2).

p. 109 Bridge between Juarez and El Paso. Inspection station.  
June 1937 (3).

p. 110 El Paso housewives returning from Juarez. May 1937.  
Hall Cty. Drawing water. One of 10 children. June 1937.

p. 111 Robstown. Cotton bales on platform. August 1936.

p. 112 Carrizo Springs. "Bob Lemmons, born a slave about 1850,  
south of San Antonio. He knew Billy the Kid." August 1936.

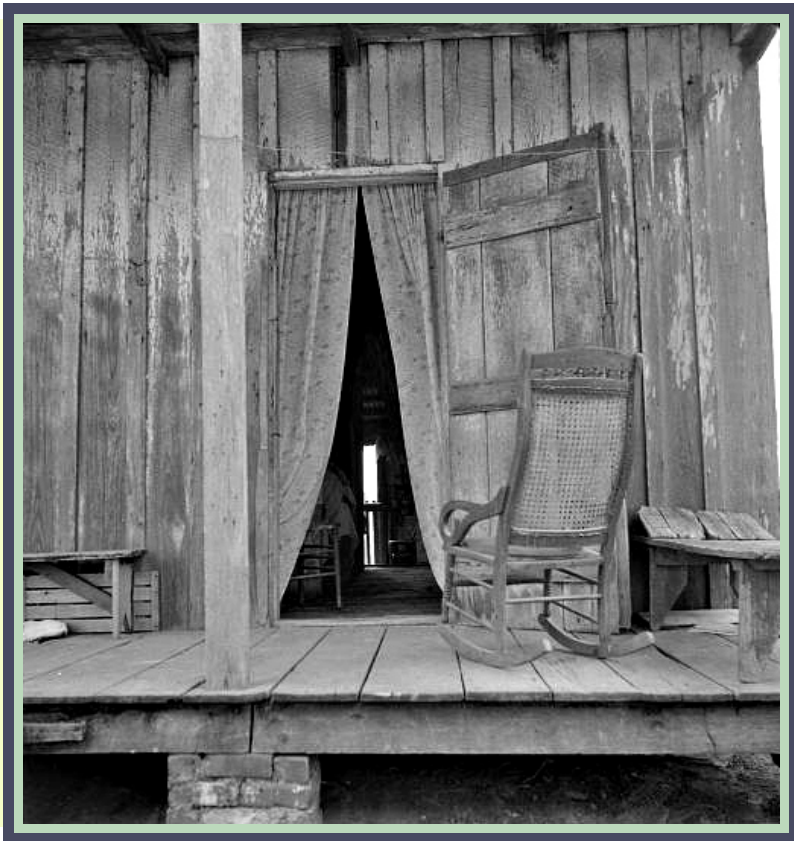
From near Houston. Mother, children. February 1939.

p. 113 No location. Farm operated on thirds and fourths. June 1937.

Madera Cty. \$5 a month rent. "No chance for a fellow to get a holt."  
February 1939.

p. 114 From Turley, TX. Girl. Family picked cotton in Arizona, fruit  
in Oregon and Idaho, potatoes in California. September 1939.





## Afterward

Three goals guided the preparation of this volume. The first, to collect and curate a book length selection of Dorothea Lange's Southern photographs. Taken for the FSA, that work presents a time and place where two powerful forces, creativity and poverty, saw eye to eye. In sets and in single photographs, Dorothea Lange is storytelling, of respite, of resistance, of race, of reasons that are not ordained by chance or character. Without bias or judgement, she reveals the human cost of a system as unique to America as are her photographs.

Within this collection of her photographs are several studies that share her approach to craft and technique. She often took several photographs, moving closer with each one; ending in portraits, singular or as a group. She photographs from different sides, left, right, in front, even from the back. She is composing the angles of views. Many of her photographs have an instantly identifiable feel in their composition.

Several great photographs are printed so poorly they were impossible to include. This is the result of work was too washed out (over or under developed) or badly out of focus. In the days before digital photography, the chemical process of developing negatives in dark rooms and the skill of finely focusing each photograph to bring out its subtle details and textures of light was a production step that enhanced the photographer's creative gifts--or trashed them. Seldom did the labs do Dorothea Lange any favors. This collection has a range of these photographs; their differences are easily seen. They are included for their documentary history of the developing and printing process, and for the social history they capture even in out of focus or washed out frames.

Social history is the second goal of this volume: the photographs provide a unique, long witness across several states during difficult economic times by a single onlooker who is watching and noticing, observing the world and its people and conditions with a powerful, relentless eye. In these photographs, Dorothea Lange leads us inside a unique era in a uniquely American place: the American South.

In each face and place, she shows us living history. More, she reveals the remarkable power of people to confront and transcend their limits and circumstances.

Why have her Southern photographs been overlooked? Is it because she shows a people happy despite limits rather than people happy with limits? Her photographs of people are transcendent. Even when they are resting, the photographs show them turning to an inner strength, an intangible that is visible.

That visible intangible is the reason for the third goal: to celebrate Dorothea Lange's art--although she never thought of herself in this way. Yet her work speaks for her. Time after time, she produces magnificent photographs. Her images point back to her own inner qualities of viewing.

In one sense, she is as blank as her film. In another, she is waiting to interact with something guided by what she sees. Her recognition of the appearance of this inner quality is the gift that allows her to understand and know when it is ready to be set as an image through the chemistry of photography.

Dorothea Lange was comfortable with her work being cropped and edited; she was never rigid about its boundaries.

I have cropped many of her photographs to better fit the smaller format of the book. She worked in large format, capturing surrounding information that doesn't change the intimate sense of her work at the center.

Dorothea Lange was a master technician with a fluid, direct style who saw photography not only as images, but as craft and technique. She worked to control the technique, refining it in these unusual settings, making it a silent partner in her work. Her technique is the platform for the heart of her photographs.

As process, as documents, and as art, Dorothea Lange's Southern photographs offer broad, rare looks into American communities. In every place she worked she was a visitor, drawing water from the deep wells. For the author and for readers, she is the talent and guiding partner for this collection of her work. Throughout, Dorothea Lange reminds us, "My powers of observation are fairly good. I like to use them."

Southern native and Johns Hopkins Fellow in Community Systems (1986)  
Walter Rhett writes Black History 360\*, has a blog at the San Francisco Chronicle and is a verified commenter for the New York Times.

## Dorothea Lange, from her Smithsonian American Archives of Art Interview, 1964

"I had sort of initiated it. It was new. There was no photo-journalism. Photo-journalism, they tell me, grew out of this work we were doing. You never-I mean, the fellow who can trace these things in a direct line and make a neat little graph or a neat little pattern of it, he's apt to prune off the truth, you know."



"Yes, I feel it. I don't say I'm highly original, but after all these years of work, I have a certain, well, not exactly a style, but a tonality that I recognize as my own. Now, I begin to recognize it. I'll say, "Well there's a Lange for you." I'll show you one. I just did one that I know is."



Mississippi (4), July 1937.

Dorothea Lange. 1936.



Walter Rhett. 2013.



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July 2014

# No Flowerbed Of Ease • Walter Rhett

